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contributors

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JANE FRANK, along with her husband Howard, is a well-known and longtime art collector who in 1991 founded the art agency Worlds of Wonder when she discovered how few artists in the sci-fi/fantasy genre were able to gain exposure for their art beyond the opportunities afforded by conventions devoted to the field. In addition to publishing numerous magazine articles and essays on artists and the art of collecting, she co-authored (with Howard) two art books documenting their 30+-year collecting habit: *The Frank Collection: A Showcase of the World's Fantastic Art* and *Great Fantasy Themes from the Frank Collection,* both published by Paper Tiger. *The Art of John Berkey* was published in fall 2003.

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ERIC M. WITCHEY is an award-winning writer who lurks amid ferns in the Northwest. When not teaching or writing, he stands in streams flipping flies as mythical fish and wondering in awe at the complexity of a universe in which a man can easily spend a thousand dollars to trick a finned creature whose brain is the size of a pea.

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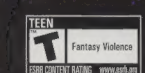

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By Resa Nelson

Fantasy time travel movies connect the present with the past.

Who hasn't dreamed of going back to the past to right a wrong or to change the course of one's life? Or travel to catch a glimpse of history?

Some of the most successful movies in recent history have tapped into this desire. The *Back to the Future* and *Terminator* series spawned three movies each. More recently, *12 Monkeys* provided a strange twist on time. All are fine films, but they lean closer to science fiction than fantasy.

This column examines the ten best time travel movies more closely linked to fantasy. These are movies that connect the present to the past, whether the past is the 1300s or the 1950s or simply a few years ago in a character's life. Some are movies that bring a familiar bit of history into the present, ranging from witch trials to the search for Jack the Ripper.

Hang on and enjoy the ride.

The Time Machine (2002) is based on the novel by H.G. Wells and directed by his grandson, Simon Wells. This latest, high-tech version of the classic tale stars Guy Pearce (*Memento, L.A. Confidential*) as Alexander Hartdegen, a man haunted by his inability to change his past.

Happily on his way to propose marriage to Emma (played by Sienne Guillory of *The Rules of Engagement*), Alexander stops to buy flowers. Living in the horse-and-buggy era, he's easily distracted by a new-fangled car parked by the curb. Soon enough, Alexander meets Emma in a park, but they're interrupted by a mugger with a gun, who struggles to pull the newly accepted engagement ring from Emma's finger. The mugger accidentally shoots Emma, and Alexander's plans for a happy future are destroyed when she dies.

Somewhere in Time, *starring Jane Seymour and Christopher Reeve, has attained cult status among its legions of fans.*

Obsessed, Alexander feverishly throws himself into researching and building a time machine. He travels back to the day Emma died and stops her from going to the park where she was murdered. This time, she dies in a different accident. Alexander realizes an awful truth: No matter how many times he goes back to save Emma's life, it's never going to work. Emma will die every time, and he'll have to suffer through it again and again.

Done with the past, Alexander flings himself into the future, eventually landing in a very distant and mysterious future. Fans of Wells' novel will recognize the Eloi and the Morlocks.

Alexander falls in love again, only to find his new love in peril. He learns why he can't change the past, and he struggles to find the balance between the possibilities and impossibilities of controlling the world around him.

Frequency (2000) is an unconventional time travel story. No one physically travels through time. It's the tale of a son who stumbles upon a way to talk to his long-dead father.

In 1969, Frank (played by Dennis Quaid of *Far From Heaven* and *Dragonheart*) is a New York firefighter who loves his wife and 6-year-old son John. Frank is a die-hard Mets fan. As the 1969 World

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ABOVE: Bruce Campbell and Embeth Davidtz star in Army of Darkness, *a horror movie with a comic twist. RIGHT: Griffin (Hamish McFarlane) leads a group of 14th-century men into modern New Zealand in* The Navigator.

Series unfolds, he notices an unusual occurrence of the aurora borealis in the skies above.

Thirty years later, the grown-up John (played by Jim Caviezel of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Angel Eyes*) lives alone in the family home. He's been dumped by his girlfriend and is unhappy with his life, except for his job as a police officer. His father Frank died fighting a fire during the 1969 World Series. John barely remembers his father and is haunted by the loss.

When a neighbor uncovers Frank's old HAM radio in a closet, they set it up. The aurora borealis makes another unusual appearance, and John strikes up a conversation with a man on the radio. John realizes he's talking to his father, thirty years in the past. Frank refuses to buy into it until John "predicts" the results of the next World Series game. Frank takes to heart life-changing information that John gives him.

The problem is, once things begin to change, a terrible consequence rears its head. Father and son must now join forces across time to help each other combat a dire situation.

Pleasantville (1998) is a film most people tend to love or hate. Written and directed by veteran Gary Ross (*Big*, *Seabiscuit*), it boasts a formidable cast, including Tobey Maguire (*Spider-Man*, *The Cider House Rules*), Reese Witherspoon (*Legally Blonde*, *Election*), William H. Macy (*Fargo*, *Mystery Men*), Joan Allen (*Nixon*, TV's *The Mists of Avalon*), and Jeff Daniels (*The Hours*, *Gettysburg*).

David (played by Maguire) is a high school loner, while his twin sister Jennifer (played by Witherspoon) runs with a fast clique. Life is bleak for the siblings. Their parents are divorced but still fighting. Teachers warn of a declining job market, death and disease, and global warming. David seeks solace by losing himself in the TV Time! channel reruns of a 1950s series called *Pleasantville*, similar to *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*.

When their mother leaves for the weekend, David and Jennifer fight over the TV remote control and break it. The TV is new and can be turned on only with the remote. Magically, a TV repairman shows up at their front door. After a conversation with David reveals his in-depth knowledge of *Pleasantville*, the repairman gives them a new remote with more "oomph." Again, as the twins fight over the remote, Jennifer accidentally pushes a button that zaps them into the black-and-white world of *Pleasantville* where everyone believes they're Bud and Mary Sue, the teenage stars of the show.

David fits in immediately as Bud. He's in his element in this 1958 utopia. It's a self-contained world where the temperature is always 72 degrees, the skies are forever clear, and the local firefighters' greatest challenge is retrieving kittens from trees. However, when his sister introduces modern-day values, color begins to creep into the black-and-white world of Pleasantville and sparks real change in a static world.

Much of *Pleasantville*'s humor comes from its comparison to the Garden of Eden, but the film is about many things. It's about the importance of change and of following your heart's desire. It's about the very human tendency to resist change and the desire for everything to remain the same. It's about the realities of life—both pleasant and unpleasant—versus the happiness of an unattainable perfect life. It's about how easy it is to idealize the past and forget or ignore the problems that were part of it.

Army of Darkness (1993) is a horror movie laced with comedy ranging from clever wit to slapstick worthy of the Three Stooges. Bruce Campbell (TV's *Jack of All Trades*, *The Adventures of Brisco County, Jr.*) and Embeth Davidtz (*Schindler's List*, *Thirteen Ghosts*) star in this early effort from Sam Raimi (*Spider-Man*, *The Gift*, *A Simple Plan*), who directed and co-wrote with his brother, Ivan Raimi (*Darkman*). Third in the *Evil Dead* film franchise, this installment takes the action into the past.

Ash (played by Campbell) is your everyday Joe, hawking housewares at a local economy department store. In a high-speed flashback, Ash recounts a vacation getaway with his girlfriend to a cabin in the woods where an archaeologist had been translating the Necromonicon, a Sumerian Book of the Dead bound in human flesh and written in blood—a book never intended for the living. This discovery of the Necromonicon stirred up something dark and evil in the woods, which killed his girlfriend, then invaded Ash's body. To save his skin, Ash cut off his own hand with a chainsaw, but he's now drawn into a whirlpool of energy that drop-kicks him into medieval Europe—here's where *Army of Darkness* begins.

With car and chainsaw in tow, Ash lands among medieval soldiers who assume he's their enemy. Once captured, he's led to the kingdom's castle. When he survives being thrown into a pit with a frenetic zombie, a wise man proclaims Ash is the "promised one"—the one man who is destined to quest for the Necromonicon. Ash takes the plunge and sets out on an adventure that leads to a battle between dark forces and humanity.

On the surface, *Army of Darkness* is a campy romp loaded with laughs, sword and sorcery, magic and monsters. Look deeper, and there's a quintessential story of good and evil. It's a clever take on man fighting himself.

Warlock (1989) begins in 1691 Boston. It's the era of witch hunts, and a dangerous warlock (played by Julian Sands of *Boxing Helena* and *Gothic*) has been captured in a tower. The warlock's guilty, and he's a genuine threat to society.

The film's hero is Redferne (played by Richard E. Grant of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* and TV's *Scarlet Pimpernel*). He's already been hurt by the warlock and wants to make

sure the devil gets his due

The warlock calls up a sudden storm that whisks him into the future. Acting on instinct, Redferne discovers what's happening and gives chase, having no inkling he's traveling through time.

In modern-day California, Kassandra (played by Lori Singer of *Footloose* and *Fame*) and her roommate are startled by the warlock's crash landing in their home. The warlock escapes before Redferne can arrive to capture him.

The warlock needs to find the separated parts of a book of black magic. Centuries ago, the book was split into sections and hidden across the country. Separated, the sections are harmless, joined together, they unleash dangerous magic.

Redferne and Kassandra join forces to track down the warlock and destroy him.

The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey (1988) gives a realistic, gritty view of the Middle Ages. Set in 14th-century Europe, people are fearful of the rumored approach of the Black Death.

Griffin (played by Hamish McFarlane) is a boy with a psychic gift. He has visions of the future. He sees flashes of images, but the meaning of his visions isn't always clear. When his missing brother Connor (played by Bruce Lyons) comes home, Griffin interprets a vision as a message that they must tunnel through the earth to the other side of the world. The men in Griffin's village trust his visions, so they join forces with the boy and his older brother.

They tunnel deep into the Earth and eventually dig their way through to the present, finding themselves in a modern New Zealand city.

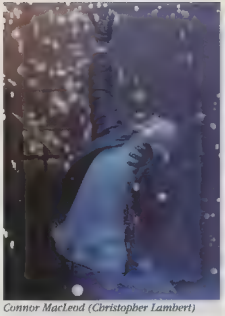
They believe the earth is flat and has two sides. Amazed by this new world, one of Griffin's crew speculates that if the side of the world they come from is evil, then this side must be good. It must be God's city.

However, it's a dangerous world for the medievalists. Their first task is to cross a busy highway at night in a harrowing and poignant scene. Not understanding cars or traffic makes crossing the highway a terrifying dilemma.

Led by Griffin's visions, the men decide they need to cast metal into a crucifix and raise it on a church in the city as an offering, hoping this will protect them from the plague. They befriend metalworkers who help them, and the group separates. Connor arrives at the church first and he's determined to raise the crucifix before dawn, as Griffin has advised.

Suddenly, Griffin is haunted by visions of one of their number falling to his death while climbing a tall ladder to reach the church's steeple. Griffin must hurry to save the life that's at risk.

Highlander (1986) handles time travel in a unique way. Russell Edwin Nash (played by Christopher Lambert of *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan*) lives for centuries because he doesn't age and doesn't die. He's one of a small group of immortals who are fated to kill each other until only one remains.



Connor MacLeod (Christopher Lambert) experiences the Quickening in Highlander

The film begins when Nash uses a sword to decapitate one of his fellow immortals in a parking garage after a pro wrestling match. The police and a woman forensics officer investigate.

Highlander uses flashbacks to 1536 Scotland when Nash lived as Connor MacLeod, who has no reason to assume he's anything other than an average mortal man. A stranger seemingly kills Connor, who recovers quickly from what looked like certain death. When Connor shows up at the local tavern the next day, the same people who loved him are now afraid of him. They decide it's the devil's work, and they ban Connor from the clan.

Connor eventually gains a mentor, Juan Sanchez Villa Lobos Ramirez, played by Sean Connery (*League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, Dragonheart*), who tells him who he really is and what his life will be about.

The notion of immortality is intriguing and seductive. At first glance, who wouldn't want to live forever? The power of *Highlander* is watching how Connor comes to understand the dark side of immortality as he struggles with more pain and loss than any of us are likely to ever know.

Time Bandits (1981) is a humorous romp through time and fantasy as seen through the eyes of Monty Python's Terry Gilliam, who produced and directed the movie, co-writing the script with fellow Python Michael Palin. It stars Sean Connery, Shelley Duval (*The Shining, Popeye*), and Monty Python's John Cleese, and features a musical score by George Harrison.

The story begins in the present day when Kevin, a young boy, is ordered to bed by his parents. When Kevin turns out his bedroom light, a knight on a horse crashes out from Kevin's closet and vanishes through the bedroom wall. Quickly, everything returns to normal.

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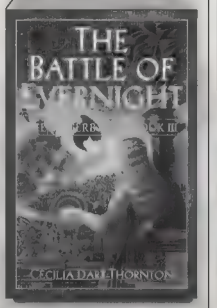

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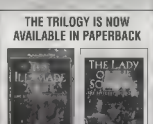

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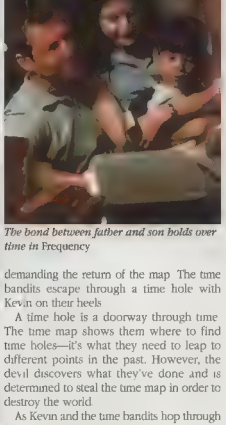
Kevin's convinced it wasn't just his imagination Armed with a Polaroid camera, he goes to bed the next night determined to get proof But this time, a group of little people comes out of his closet. They're the time bandits describing themselves as former employees of the Supreme Being. They've stolen a time map from the Supreme Being because they feel underappreciated. Their mission is to establish themselves as international thieves throughout the fabric of time

A disembodied, floating head of the Supreme Being emerges from Kevin's closet,



The bond between father and son holds over time in Frequency

demanding the return of the map The time bandits escape through a time hole with Kevin on their heels

A time hole is a doorway through time The time map shows them where to find time holes—it's what they need to leap to different points in the past. However, the devil discovers what they've done and is determined to steal the time map in order to destroy the world

As Kevin and the time bandits hop through time, their adventures become more fantastic and magical

Somewhere in Time (1980) is a romantic fantasy based on the Richard Matheson novel, *Bid Time Return*. Starring Christopher Reeve (*Superman*) and Jane Seymour (TV's *Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman*), it tells the tale of a mysterious old woman who inspires a young man to travel back to the past

Richard Collier (played by Reeve) is a successful Chicago playwright facing hard times He finds it impossible to finish writing a new, commissioned play He's just broken up with his girlfriend. His solution is to leave town On a whim, he stops at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, Michigan

Years ago, an old woman had given a pocket watch to him after a performance of one of his college plays Handing it to him, she'd said, "Come back to me."

Richard still carries the pocket watch He wanders into a Hall of History inside the Grand Hotel, where he's drawn to a portrait of an unidentified young woman Seeking help from the hotel staff, Richard learns the woman was an actress in a play staged at the Grand Hotel in 1912 He can't stop thinking about the portrait, and he keeps digging for information He discovers she was Elise McKenna (played by Seymour) a famous actress When he sees a photograph of Elise taken in her later years, he recognizes her as the woman who gave him the pocket watch

Richard investigates time travel After trial and error, he succeeds in traveling back to 1912 and meets Elise She's watched closely by her manager, who's determined not to let an obsessed Richard anywhere near his star

Time After Time (1979) is a romance thriller that poses the question. What if H.G Wells had invented a real time machine, and one of his friends turned out to be Jack the Ripper?

The story begins in 1893 London when Wells (played by Malcolm McDowell of *A Clockwork Orange* and *Tank Girl*) hosts a dinner party. One of his guests, Dr. John Stevenson (played by David Warner of *The Omen* and TV's *The Secret Adventures of Jules Verne*) arrives late, just in time to hear Wells' announcement that he plans to travel through time, followed by a show and-tell of his sparkling new time machine

Two men from Scotland Yard interrupt by knocking on Wells' front door Jack the Ripper has just killed a prostitute, and they're hot on his trail. They search Wells' home, confiscate the doctor's bag, and discover incriminating evidence. Despite a locked house and watchful eyes, they can't find Dr Stevenson Somehow, he's managed to escape

Once he's rid of Scotland Yard and his dinner guests, Wells discovers his time machine is gone—fortunately, he had previously pocketed a key, so the machine soon reappears He detects it's returned from the year 1979

Wells firmly believes within three generations the world is destined to evolve into a utopia. He bounds into the future, expecting to find a place where all people are equal and war has become obsolete—a world that would be terribly threatened by Jack the Ripper

The time machine lands in 1979 inside a San Francisco museum, and Wells goes hunting for his friend. He meets Amy (played by Mary Steenburgen of TV's *Joan of Arcadia* and *Living with the Dead*) and falls in love with her She helps him locate Dr. Stevenson Wells confronts him, but the doctor escapes—and the race to stop Jack from ripping up the women in San Francisco is on

Despite special effects that seem primitive by today's standards, *Time After Time* is a clever, funny, and thought provoking movie that has aged well. So much, in fact, that it seems more relevant as time goes by than when it was first released

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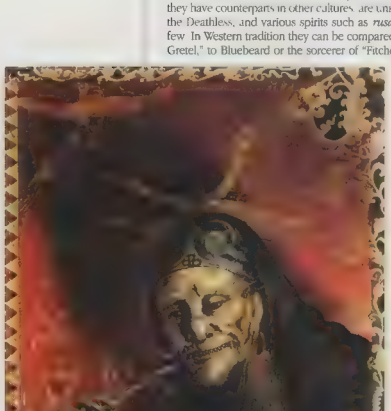
By Helen Pilinovsky

Russian fairy tale character Baba Yaga finds her place in contemporary fiction.

Firebirds and firebrands, forests and fools, water and witches, puissant princesses and pulchritudinous princes: all of these and more are elements within the environment of Russian fairy tales. Many of these factors are similar to those found in fairy tales the world over, as are the history and structure of tales in Russia. However, the fairy tales of Russia also possess a number of characters who, though they have counterparts in other cultures, are unique to the Slavic tradition, including Baba Yaga, Koshchei the Deathless, and various spirits such as *rusalkas, vodoniye, leshiye,* and *domovneye,* to name only a few. In Western tradition they can be compared, respectively, to Frau Holle or the witch of "Hansel and Gretel," to Bluebeard or the sorcerer of "Fitcher's Bride," and to the nixies, selkies, elves, and brownies of folklore. However, these characters differ sharply in a number of important ways. As Russia acquired a broad level of literacy relatively late in its history, many of the trappings associated with these characters are closely linked to holdovers from the oral tradition, reflecting elements of pre-Christian belief—a characteristic underscored by Russian folklorists' reluctance to alter their tales merely for the purposes of propriety. These factors came together to create a pantheon of figures more individual and more primal than those of Western fairy tales, characteristics that come through clearly in their use in modern fiction. The examination of these characters in lore and literature allows us to better understand Russian folk beliefs of the past, as well as modern attitudes toward fairy tales and the fantastic. For the sake of brevity, let's look at the character of Baba Yaga, who stands as a good example for the whole of Russian folk belief.



Painting © Richard Corben

Baba Yaga is a complex character in Russian fairy tales. She chooses to use her powers for good or evil, depending on the circumstances of the specific story.

One of the best known figures from Russian folklore, Baba Yaga's name can be roughly translated as "Granny Yaga." In *Russian Myths*, Elizabeth Warner notes that Baba Yaga brings many of the dominant themes of Russian fairy tales together: she travels on the wind; occupies the domain of the *leshi*, the forest spirits, is associated with death, and is an acceptable surrogate for the generic *ved'ma*, or witch. Also known as "Baba Yaga *Kostinaya Noga*," ("Baba Yaga Bony Leg"), she possesses gnashing steel teeth and penetrating eyes, and, in short, is quite enough to intimidate even the most courageous (or foolhardy, depending on the tale) hero or heroine. Like the witches of other cultures, her preferred method of transportation is an implement commonly used for household labor, although, unlike the witches of the West who travel on a broom, she chooses to ride in a mortar, rowing with a pestle and using a broom to sweep away the tracks that she leaves. Her home is a mobile hut perched on chicken legs, which folklorist Vladimir Propp hypothesized might be related to the zoomorphic *izbushkii*, or initiation huts, where neophytes were symbolically "consumed" by the monster, only to emerge later as adults.

In his book *An Introduction to the Russian Folktale*, Jack Haney points out that Baba Yaga's hut "has much in common with the village bathhouse ... the place where many ritual ceremonies occurred, including the initiatory rituals." This corresponds to the role that her domicile plays in the fairy tales of Russia: Although the nature of the initiation differs from story to story, dependent upon the circumstances of the protagonist, Baba Yaga's presence invariably serves as a signifier of change. Baba Yaga's domain

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is the forest, widely acknowledged as a traditional symbol of change and a place of peril, where she acts as either a challenger or a helper to those innocents who venture into her realm. In Western tales, these two roles are typically polarized, split into different characters stereotyped as either "witch" or "fairy godmother." Baba Yaga, however, is a complex individual depending on the circumstances of the specific story. She may choose to use her powers for good or ill.

One of the aspects of Baba Yaga that makes her fairly threatening even when she plays the helper role is that, like the witch of "Hansel and Gretel," her culinary habits leave something to be desired. She is a cannibal. Children who fail to observe proper etiquette in her home find themselves serving as examples to the audience and served to the witch as meals. Theorists connect these tales to a Russian ritual of healing referred to as *perepekanie* (rebaking) in which newly born or ill children were placed in a warm oven with the incantation *Just as the dough rises, so let the body of this child rise, too.* Jack Haney notes that this "rite finds its analogue in those tales in which a witch, the Baba Yaga, captures a small boy, Ivanushka, and prepares to eat him . . . She tells him to lie down on the oven panel. He lies down, hands and feet straight up, and therefore does not fit into the oven. He asks her to show him how to lie on the oven panel correctly. She lies down, and he pops her into the oven and roasts her."

Haney's use of "the" in reference to Baba Yaga indicates her definitive positioning in the hierarchy of Russian myth. Unlike other villains, who may be defeated once, never to be heard from again, Baba Yaga is not permanently conquerable, for she is far more than just another witch. In such stories, typically, the protagonists fall into Baba Yaga's hands by breaking some rule of the forest or by abusing her hospitality, and are assisted or advised by woodland creatures they have met and befriended along the way. Vladimir Propp compared Baba Yaga's role as mistress of the forest and its denizens to a parallel figure from the Indic Rig Veda. It is likely that Baba Yaga is a amalgam of numerous archetypes, incorporating elements of rulers of the forest and underworld mistresses in a single entity. Scholars of Slavic mythology have also linked her to the ancient Indo-European goddess of death. The forest of Baba Yaga symbolizes more than the forest, it is also the Otherworld, the "land of the living dead," also known as "the thrice nine kingdom."

The land of "the truly dead," also known as the "thrice-ten kingdom," is separate from her realm. Frequently, the boundary between the two lands is symbolized by a river of fire that Baba Yaga cannot cross—though the hero or heroine often must. In those cases, Baba Yaga traverses the same bridge as the hero or heroine, only to have it break she hurtles, not to her death, because she appears in other stories, but certainly out of the present story. When she does return, she is unchanged, indicating one of the fundamental tenets of the Russian fairy tale: that while humanity may enact changes for the better, there will always be forces working against it.

Painting by Ivan Bilibin

Baba Yaga's domain is the forest, a traditional symbol of change and a place of danger

Baba Yaga's role as a "witch" in the stereotypical sense is clear in her accoutrements, in her personal habits, and in her participation in the Russian variant of "Hansel and Gretel." However, despite the literal translation of *ved ma* (witch), her behavior is far more benevolent, if not entirely benign, in other stories. In modern retellings, Baba Yaga's semi-schizophrenic presentation in the original folklore has caused some difficulties for contemporary authors. It is difficult to write of her without emphasizing one aspect over another. The choices that are made, and the stories that they are set in, provide for fascinating comparisons that indicate as much about today's culture as the older versions did of theirs.

Let's look at three treatments of Baba Yaga that correspond to the three aspects from traditional lore we have already examined - Baba Yaga as cannibal, Baba Yaga as helper, and Baba Yaga as figure of malevolence—in Neil Gaiman's graphic story "The Land of Summer's Twilight" (from *Books of Magic*), Gene Wolfe's short story "The Death of Koshchei the Deathless (a tale of old Russia)" (from *Ruby Slippers, Golden Tears*), and Orson Scott Card's novel *Enchantment*.

Neil Gaiman sets his version of Baba Yaga and her realm deep within the forests of Fairyland, and we encounter them along the course of a quest undertaken by his hero, Timothy Hunter. Prior to embarking upon his journey, Timothy is acquainted with the basic rules of Fairy: to abandon Gold Iron, to ask no questions or favors and accept no gifts, to mind his manners, and, most important of all, to never stray from the path. The first stop on the journey, fittingly enough, is the Goblin Market. From its inception in fantastic literature with Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" as a place where mortals could interact freely with the denizens of Fairy, the Goblin Market has been a liminal space where rules and boundaries must be more strictly enforced to maintain the balance required for the existence of such a place. It is thus the perfect setting for our hero to learn that actions in Fairy have consequences, as he discovers when a goblin named Snout attempts to plant an article of jewelry on him, hoping to procure the boy's services as a personal servant as a penalty for "theft." In restitution, Timothy and his companions—his guide, Dr. Occult of comics fame in our dimension, known as Rose in Fairy, and his owl—are entitled to choose one item apiece from Snout's possessions. They pick an enameled pocket mirror, a bejeweled chain, and an oblong sphere of crystal—named to Timothy by the Warden of the Market, Glory, with some appreciation, as a Mundane Egg—before continuing on their journey.

Along the way, Rose further acquaints Timothy with some of the rules of Fairy—to avoid the ingestion of Fairy's substances, for example, and thus, their unpredictable side-effects—and reminds Timothy of the most basic rule: To stay on the path. Eventually, however, the companions are separated . . . in a wood containing a hut just off the path, a hut surrounded by posts surmounted with skulls whose eyes glare flame.

Following a fine, long tradition of heroes incapable to following directions, Timothy steps off the path in the mistaken belief that his companions have done so also . . . only to encounter Baba Yaga. As he reaches up to touch the shoulder of the figure he believes to be his guide, Timothy plaintively asks, "What *is* it? What's *wrong*?" That question is answered soon enough, both in the leering visage of Baba Yaga (beautifully depicted by the eloquent pen of artist Charles Vess), and in her mocking words: "What's *wrong*? Why, you've stepped off the *path*, boychik . . . *That's*

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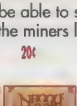

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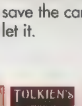

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what's wrong. Hee hee hee." By leaving the path, regardless of the provocation, Timothy Hunter has made himself fair prey for Yaga by the rules of etiquette.

Gaiman's approach to Baba Yaga utilizes the same basic tenets of her personality made manifest in many traditional Russian stories: her hunger, her cunning, and her malevolence. When confronted with Tim's assurance that his protector will find them, Baba Yaga's reply is simply that "Baba Yaga's little *house* is in the *heart* of the wild forest. And it will not be found in the same place two days running." Her emphasis on "heart" serves to underscore the ravenous nature of the running monologue concerning what it is that she's found: "*What's* Baba Yaga found for herself? Is it a *stew*? Is it a *roast*? Is it *blood pudding*? Oh yes. *All* of them. *Juicy* and *meaty* and *tender* and *sweet*." When she speaks, in the traditional manner, of her anticipated feast, saying, "Ohh! Such *feasting* I will make. The *grease* will run down *my chin*, and I will crack your *bones* with my *iron teeth* to suck the *marrow* from within ," the combined effect of text and illustration flawlessly demonstrates the distinctive appeal of the genre, culminating in a presentation of Baba Yaga that manages to convey her threat as few other works have done.

When Baba Yaga leaves her home to obtain the correct spices, ordering her house to wander to a safer location in her absence, Timothy makes the acquaintance of the rest of her larder: a long-eared hare and a hedgehog (well, hedge-piggie, to use the preferred term). These animals are Tim's natural allies for two reasons. The first? Tradition. Animal helpers frequently appear in Baba Yaga stories. The second reason is that of nationality, for while Baba Yaga's Russian origins come through quite clearly in her colloquialisms, so too do theirs, and these are *not* the anthropomorphic beasts of Russia, but rather closer kin to the characters of *The Wind in the Willows* and to Timothy himself. One of Gaiman's gifts in world-building is his ability to effortlessly find points of Otherworldly commonality (a gift exploited to good use here as well as in *Stardust* and *American Gods* two other works that occasionally make use of Russian lore). Through a blend of cooperation (and the realization that Timothy's owl's bejeweled chain from the Market is actually Empusa's Infinitely Extendable), the group manages to entangle the legs of the hut and crash it, both allowing for a fortuitous escape, and, less fortunately, rousing the wrath of Baba Yaga.

Interestingly enough, Gaiman does not choose to have Timothy Hunter himself defeat Baba Yaga, pointing either to a remnant of the Comics Code (as most means of dispensing with Baba Yaga are, of necessity, rather brutal) or, more likely, to an ongoing immaturity in the character, requiring a longer story arc to rectify properly (a supposition supported by Tim's ongoing adventures, which include the unwise acceptance of a present from Titania, the Queen of Fairy, of all people). The method that he does choose to force her to surrender her claim bears interesting repercussions, however: his Rose threatens Baba Yaga with the vocalization of her true name, a technique efficacious in other cultures, but not one used with any frequency in Russian lore. It implies a cross-cultural set of rules at play within this Otherworldly melting pot which is well worth considering. That inference is supported by the precise wording of the threat. Rose asks Baba Yaga, "Do you wish me to *shout* it now, so that all of the *animals* of the *forest*, all of the *birds* of the *air*, every passing *nixie* and *boggart* will know it?" Despite the fact that the nixies and boggarts come from entirely different mythic systems, it is apparent that Baba Yaga does not; she surrenders her claim.

Despite the complexity of characterization, this is the most straightforward of the modern retellings to be examined here, in its faithfulness to the preceding lore attached to Baba Yaga. By comparison, Gene Wolfe and Orson Scott Card both adapt the character considerably, focusing specifically upon Baba Yaga's affinity with women, and the fact of her woman hood itself, while achieving entirely different results.

The introduction to Wolfe's story "The Death of Koshchei the Deathless" states that "in reading the original [fairy tale], Wolfe was struck by the things left out or implied, presumably to protect young ears … and decided to fill in the blanks for adults." Wolfe fills in quite a number of things, including historical etiology and a clear reason for his hero's maturation—the direct guidance of Baba Yaga. The story is narrated to an unseen audience of one, whose identity is revealed late in the text.

In the original fairy tale of the same title, a prince named Ivan (a name as ubiquitous in Russian tales as Jack is in English ones) is bid by his dying parents to make good marriages for his sisters. He weds them to three sorcerous birds—a falcon, an eagle, and a raven—before realizing that in their absence, his life is devoid of meaning. Going forth on a pilgrimage to find them, he instead encounters a mighty warrior queen, Marya Morevna, at the site of her most recent victory, and the two are swiftly wed. (It is worth noting here that Marya is also the name of one of Ivan's sisters.) All goes well until the queen sets out on her next military campaign, enjoining Ivan to avoid a certain closet in her chambers. Ivan (reprising the role of Bluebeard's wife) is unable to resist such a temptation, and unwittingly frees one of the great figures of notoriety in Russian myth, the sorceror Koshchei the Deathless. Koshchei promptly kidnaps Marya for his own, leaving Ivan to try to reclaim her. After three failed rescue attempts, with the sorceror catching up each time, Koshchei loses patience and dismembers Ivan, flinging his remains into the Baltic Sea.

Ivan is recovered by his avian in-laws, resurrected by his clever sisters, and sets off after Marya once more. This time she informs him that the reason they cannot flee fast enough to escape Koshchei is because he rides a stallion that was a gift from Baba Yaga, and Ivan resolves to acquire a stallion from Baba Yaga himself. He travels to Baba Yaga's realm and offers to watch her herds for three days. If he he manages to keep her herds intact, he will then then be gifted with a steed. Baba Yaga attempts to circumvent the terms of their agreement through trickery, but in the end a colt from her stable (along with skills of cunning that Ivan has learned through her unwitting tutelage) allows the prince to finally rescue Marya and defeat Koshchei the Deathless.

Prince Ivan the Bold, in Gene Wolfe's story, like his predecessor in the fairy tale, experiences the loss of his parents and the ensuing responsibility for his siblings. He, too, must marry them off, though in this tongue-in-cheek retelling, the falcon, eagle, and raven of the original story are transfigured into the Graf von Falkonstein, the King of Poland (with an eagle for his crest), and a "raven" who is only identified as being from Hungary, all of whom come armed to the teeth to demand their respective brides. Afterward, left on his own, Ivan pines for his sisters' company and eventually decides that he must go forth to seek them out. When he comes across a battlefield and the fierce warrior responsible for it, it is not Marya Morevna whom he meets, but rather Marya, the newly widowed Countess Von Falkonstein … his sister. Unfortunately this fact does not come to light until the morning after Ivan spends the night in Marya's tent.

Wolfe's adjustments to the traditional fairy tale highlight some of the confusing and contradictory elements of the story. The addition of incest, while discomfiting, serves to poke gentle fun at the potential misunderstandings in a tale possessing two characters bearing the same name. It serves, as well, to reference a longstanding element of such behavior in Russian tales, and to explain the otherwise incomprehensible reasoning behind the original Ivan's encounter with Marya Morevna, their brief sojourn, and their hasty marriage. In Wolfe's story, it quickly becomes clear that the marriage stems from convenience as much as anything else, neither party is willing to reveal the occurrence of the taboo to world, and the resulting birth of a child (also named Ivan, soon to be known as the Ivan the Simple) negates the possibility of ignoring it entirely.

In this story, too, Ivan the Bold frees Koshchei from captivity, but in a far less fantastically embroidered manner than found in the fairy tale. Ivan comes across a certain door in the dungeons of his sister's castle and opens it entirely out of idle curiosity. There he discovers Koshchei, condemned to starvation by the Countess. The prince frees him, feeds him, and then the two negotiate a treaty of peace to resolve the issues that had been the source of conflict between Koshchei and Marya. But when they set out to inform her of this happy news, Koshchei falls helplessly in love with

her and stages a revolt in order to carry Marya away with him. Her absence disturbs Prince Ivan not at all—his brotherly fondness having faded under the pressures of their new relationship—until he learns that the familial estate will revert back to the Holy Roman Empire unless he can furnish proof of Marya's continued existence. Valuing his comfort, Ivan attempts to verify his sister's residence among the living, in the course of which Marya convinces him to help her escape from Koshchei. They escape and flee, they're caught again and the cycle repeats the requisite three times before Koshchei decides that "even the most deeply felt gratitude has limits." He kills Ivan in the prescribed manner and throws his remains into the Baltic Sea.

The story goes on. Ivan, son of Ivan, grows to maturity in peace, his life disturbed only by the issue which had so troubled his father: the threatened loss of the familial homestead unless the Countess Von Falkonstein appears at court to verify his parentage. Ivan sets out alone to find her, earning his reputation as "the Simple." Attempting to reach Koshchei's court, Ivan (hereditary tendencies intact) loses his way and finds himself in the realm of Baba Yaga. "Not the witch they talk of to frighten children," explains Ivan the younger, revealed as the narrator of Wolfe's story. "All that is purest superstition, though we call it now by the polite name of folklore. By 'Baba Yaga' I intend the Grand Duchess, that terrible old woman."

Baba Yaga as presented here as a mundane noblewoman, an interesting reinterpretation of the power wielded by that worthy character, which has traditionally been natural in origin rather than societal. But like the fairy tale Baba Yaga, the Grand Duchess possesses a special aptitude for understanding the hearts of men—or, rather more specifically in this tale, the hearts of women. The Grand Duchess welcomes Ivan to her estates "with old-fashioned boyar courtesy—turning out her serfs to cheer, and all the rest of it," before marking his resemblance to his father. This point leads Ivan to the matter of his quest, to which the duchess suggests a solution, that he feign Ivan the Bold's resurrection, thus using the element of surprise to achieve his goal of defeating Koshchei and retrieving his mother. Ivan the Simple stays on the Grand Duchess's estates for a period of some months, receiving tattoos that will allow him the pretense of actually *being* his father in the flesh—the tattoos placed at the joints of each limb to mark the spots of his dismemberment. Wolfe's Baba Yaga also provides assistance in another form that falls within the figure's traditional purview: she gives Ivan the skills and cunning to understand human motivations. As Wolfe tells us, in Ivan's voice, "She lectured me about women, too. I think that was really much more important, and so must she have, because she kept me there for months, getting tattooed and getting sick from it and recovering, while she recounted long stories from her past and

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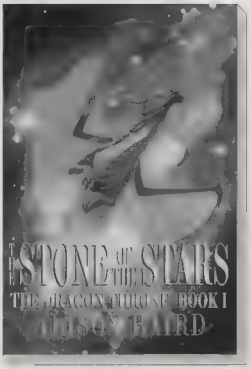

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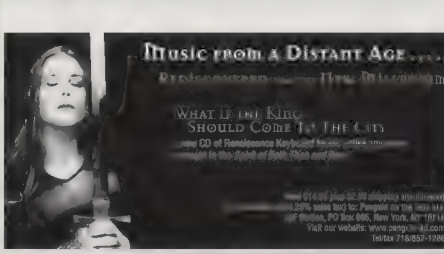
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asked, when she had finished each of them, how the woman at the center would act

Ivan notes, "No one, I think, has ever looked deeper into the human heart—into women's hearts, particularly, for men's hearts are simple things, by comparison—than old Baba Yaga." This understanding extends to other feminine beings as well, for in this version of the story it is Baba Yaga who convinces the hero to spare the lives of wild things of the forest (a *ryabchik* and her nestlings, wild bees, and a wolf, all of them female), and his "reward" is a deepening understanding of the natural world around him. Eventually, Ivan and Baba Yaga are admitted to Koshchei's palace on the strength of his impersonation of his father and the puzzlement it causes. Ivan succeeds against Koshchei and liberates his mother, not through force of arms, but by fomenting revolt amongst the women of Koshchei's kingdom, whose hearts Ivan has come to comprehend through Baba Yaga's tutelage

In the end, Wolfe's tale remains ambiguous. As Ivan says about the Grand Duchess, "We never call her Baba Yaga to her face, to be sure. And yet .." That last note of doubt encapsulates the mood of Wolfe's story as a whole. Everything appears to be entirely aboveboard, nonmagical, clearly explicable. And yet Those two words mark a space left waiting to be filled with a clever amalgamation of folklore and fictional elements. Only in the addition of nobility does the author depart from Baba Yaga's traditional characteristics Her potential for generosity and assistance and her insights into human nature were not invented by Wolfe, but rather redirected His character's instinctive desire to help the hero, without set tasks or tests to accomplish first, and her special comprehension of human nature (specifically of the female mind) make controversial use of Russian folk material, but still arguably fall within the Baba Yaga folk tradition

In his novel *Enchantment*, Orson Scott Card works with some similar aspects of the archetype of Baba Yaga, taking them, however, in a direction entirely different from Wolfe's. *Enchantment* is a time-travel fantasy that centers around the etiology of fairy tales—the story of a Russian Jewish émigré, Ivan Petrovitch Smetski, who returns to his homeland to conduct doctoral research involving Vladimir Propp's theories on fairy tales. Ivan is the child of a linguistic scholar and a witch, and he has, in fact, a second reason for the trip, for he's haunted by the childhood memory of a beautiful woman he once found sleeping an enchanted sleep in a Russian forest. That woman, as it turns out, is Katerina, the princess of a 9th-century Slavic kingdom, cast into a cataleptic trance by Baba Yaga so that Yaga can steal her kingdom

Instead of flying a broom like Western witches, Baba Yaga rides in a mortar, rowing with a pestle and using a broom to cover her tracks

Like Wolfe, Card transmutes Baba Yaga's magical abilities into social power by making her a member of the Russian nobility The secularization of her power in modern literature (as opposed to her divinely based, natural power in early folklore) indicates an interesting societal restructuring, a new means of perceiving and portraying Baba Yaga's strength and resources Card's Baba Yaga derives a great deal of her magic from the immortal being who is her unwilling husband (Bear, the anthropormophic protector of Russia), but it is made clear that this source of strength is acquired through coercion. She possesses enough magic to manipulate natural forces, but not to control them, her main ability appears to be the beguiling of unwary minds—to "turn" them—though her power is limited by the fact that she "can only use the desires already in a man's heart "

Card provides his Baba Yaga with a background that serves to explain her traditional malice Married off at the age of twelve to a brutish king, this Baba Yaga was once an innocent With each act of self-defense, the girl's identity as Yaga built slowly over time, until acts of self protection altered into acts of vengefulness and sadism. We read, "How she hated that nickname! And yet the name had stuck, until now it was the name she used for herself Her late husband King Brat had given her the name when he brought her to Kiev as his twelve-year-old bride That was the pet name he murmured to her tenderly as he raped her immature body, and again as she pretended to weep over the grave of the first baby he sired on her His dear Yaga, his sweet pet Yaga, Yaga the loving mother who pressed the face of his greedy slurping spawn into her breast long after it stopped struggling for breath and then, wailing, laid his first-born son in the very lap that had forced it on her It was a message, though Brat never understood it, dense heavy armed warrior that he was, a message that people understood now, with him deposed from his throne and then dead of a withering disease, and his widow married to a husband who at last *looked* like what every human husband was, a hairy stinking drooling beast. A simple message If you make Yaga do what she doesn't want to do, you won't like the result "

Card makes it clear that Yaga was originally "Olga, a hopeful young princess in a lovely kingdom on the south shore of the Baltic Sea." It is the metamorphosis from innocent to victim to self-protector that Yaga remembers with bitter resentment, and it was that same progression that, over time, changed the form of her message Card writes, "Maybe the message had changed over the years, and now it was more along the lines of. If you try to stop Yaga from doing what she wants to do, you and everyone you ever liked will be destroyed. But in spirit, in origin, it was really the same message If she had to leave the gloriously beautiful coastland of her childhood and then the bustling traders town of Kiev to live in this crude woodland, at least she would control all of the kingdoms around her and run things her way "

Baba Yaga's way includes a great deal of petty cruelty casting curses, tormenting unfortunate visitors and then dismembering them, both for the "magical" properties of their various body parts and for the sheer pleasure of the activity. She is not a cannibal, though she does occasionally feed her victims to Bear, her husband, her atrocities stem from hunger for power rather than Baba Yaga's traditional hunger for flesh. Her desire to win Katerina's kingdom of Taina stems from her hunger for domination However, though she resents the fact that the "only drawback was that she would always have to have some husband with the title of *king* or no one would take her seriously," she inadvertently sets the same condition for the princess Katerina

Baba Yaga places a fatal curse on Katerina—but the curse is allayed by the princess's three aunts, Tetka Retiva, Tetka Moika, and Tetka Tila, who transform it into one of eternal sleep unless the princess is rescued by the strongest knight, the wisest man, and the purest love. Instead of being devoured by Bear, as Baba Yaga had hoped, Katerina is

chased to an inaccessible woodland grove and condemned to enchanted sleep unless her true love should find her.

Card plays with the details of Pushkin's *Evgene Onegin* here, also consciously drawing on the many stones of Bear as god and as an anthropomorphic figure in Russian myth. He also, obviously, utilizes the classic motifs of the fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty." Interestingly enough, "Sleeping Beauty" is *not* a tale-type native to Russia, as Katerina's father-in-law, Ivan's role-model, folklorist Piotr Smetski points out, saying "Sleeping Beauty, I thought that it was a French fairy tale. . ." Although the French version of the story by Charles Perrault is the one most widely known today, the earliest extant version is actually from 15th-century Italy. At some point in history, the tale was transmitted to Russia, though it was modified along the way. The most commonly known variant in Russia more closely resembles the tale that we know as "Snow White" and served as the basis for Disney's cinematic adaptation.

Unlike modern versions of "Sleeping Beauty," the Italian tale (and Perrault's later version) continues on *after* the princess awakens, depicting the dangers she and her offspring face from a cannabilistic mother in law. In Card's version, too, the union of Ivan and Katerina does not secure a happy ending there must be an heir for the kingdom in order to protect it fully from Baba Yaga, and this, specifically, provides one of Card's most interesting additions to the Baba Yaga oeuvre. After spending time together in Tauna, Katerina and Ivan realize that they are not yet safe from the witch, and so they travel to the 20th century, to Ivan's home in America. There, they learn magic from Ivan's mother, Esther. Esther having learned it from the tantalizingly named Baba Tila, double of Katerina's Tetka Tila, and old enemy of Baba Yaga, now Granny rather than Aunt), and conceive a child. When strategizing the impending confrontation with Baba Yaga, Katerina says to Ivan, "If we've made a baby, if I have a child inside me when I face her, then I have a power she's never had. Well, she's conceived babies the people say, but the children were always born monsters who died at once. If we've made a child . . . there will be magic in it. Power."

Katerina's pregnancy does in fact allow her additional energies to direct against their enemy. Card is careful to point out that the child's conception is more than a ploy against Baba Yaga; it is an act of love, and a manifestation of all that Ivan and Katerina struggle to protect. Although Baba Yaga has born a child successfully (as we've been informed earlier in the text), she was also quite willing to sacrifice him for her own gains. It is not the physical inability to give birth, but Baba Yaga's lack of empathy and of altruism that deprives her of gaining additional power through motherhood—a factor that Baba Yaga is incapable of comprehending or fighting against

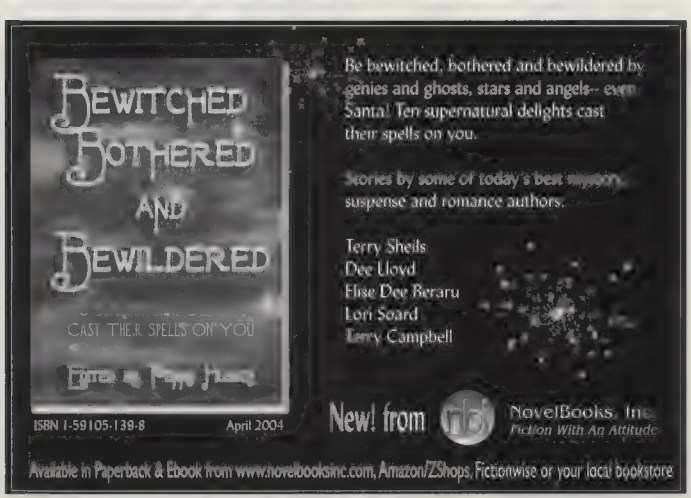
In this tale, Card highlights Baba Yaga's antagonism toward children (the weakest members of society) and women (her potential competitors), while also removing the challenge that she traditionally poses for young men moving through the process of maturation. This bleak and rather one-dimensional picture of Baba Yaga is rectified by the individualization of the character, the humor of Card's language, and the wonderfully inventive explanations he provides to account for the development of Baba Yaga's characteristics in Russian folklore from the 9th century onward, subsequent to her battle with Ivan and Katenna. (For example, her hut on chicken legs is attributed to a form of transportation that she encounters in the future, a "4" which she manages to hijack.)

Baba Yaga ends the story defeated, but not conquered. She says, "Let [Katenna] have the kingdom. What good was a kingdom anyway? Whining people to govern, rents and taxes to collect, which everyone tried to steal from her at every step in the process. What good had it done her? She'd played at it, but the game wasn't worth the cost. She was still Baba Yaga, though, wasn't she? Her books might be buried and soon burned, her spells might have been broken, but she could still do magic. The house that flies, for instance. She could make another one like it — with legs on it, like those chicken legs, which would pick up and move where she wanted it to go. That way no one would ever be certain where she was ... Inside her, the flame of malice burned as bright as ever. As bright, but smaller. Her reach was smaller, too. But so were her needs. She was retiring from public life."

As we know, that is not to be the case, for Baba Yaga always returns . . . but it is the end of Card's contribution to her story. *Enchantment* concludes with the martial and marital triumph of Ivan and Katenna—the continuation of their lineage in a brood of children to rule in Tsarna or succeed in the modern world. The story also ends with the contribution of new insights into fairy tales from the time-traveling folklorist—in the form of both uncontaminated, original tales gathered in the 9th century and Ivan and Katerina's own story, which has now become folk history. At one point in the tale, Ivan thinks "I have already changed the future. . . There will be different folktales now."

That process of alteration is one that is visible in every folktale, every retelling, and every new patch of information added onto the fabric of preexisting stories or characters. Every fairy tale figure, Baba Yaga being a prime example, becomes a conglomerate entity. While it is impossible for a single tale to contain every element of her identity, each use of her persona alludes to, and adds to, a rich history and established tradition. Baba Yaga brings together many of the dominant themes of Russian myth and legend, fitting all these themes into a single tale would be difficult, and might result in a somewhat schizophrenic character. (Some traditional tales addressed this issue by making her into a triune entity of sorts, with characters visiting three walking huts for advice from three witches, all named Baba Yaga.) Thus, as each of the older folktales tends to emphasize certain elements of her personality, so too do new ones, whether they be those of observing social norms, of assistance, or of malevolence. The character of Baba Yaga remains today, as she has always been, confusing, mesmerizing, and terrifying, regardless of whether she manifests as a witch in the forest, a noblewoman on her estate, or a terrorist in the modern world. Our continuing fascination with her indicates that her position in society—as threat, as probationer, as helper—is as vital as it has ever been, in Russia and in the rest of the world.

Orson Scott Card notes in *Enchantment* "Russian fairy tales were the only ones he'd read that were so grim, even the princess sometimes died." This ties in neatly to one of the traditional Russian fairy tale endings, used in lieu of the more optimistic, "... and they all lived happily after." In Russia, tales conclude with the sentiment that "they all lived as happily as they could, until they died." In a world with Baba Yaga in it, it seems an apt enough attitude to take. ❧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No one dared to defy the offering or challenge the dragon and soon the people who dwelled beneath the blackened mound became known as the city of the damned. The shameful past was eventually broken by a knight errant called Othrum who foolishly fell in love with one of the city's doomed maidens. When she, Elana, was selected as that season's victim her bold lover made to her a vow that she would not take the same path as her sisters in death. Othrum secretly followed the solemn procession and when Elana had been chained to the sacrificial oak, and her escort had swiftly departed, the knight stole in to the evil place and broke his lover's bonds. They might have made good their escape without hindrance had not their antics been observed by the keen eyes of the dragon.

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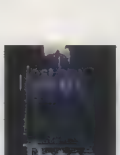
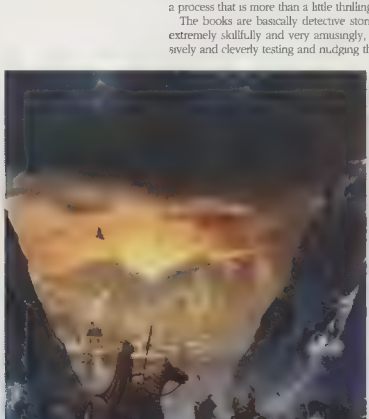
By Gahan Wilson

Peter Straub creates a new genre—the horror/crime story.



Some time ago Peter Straub took to periodically wandering off from creating marvelously varied novels that inventively explored general themes of the spooky fantastic to write a growing number of excellent books that are slowly shaping and defining what amounts to the creation of a whole new genre. It's an unfolding that is both hugely entertaining to the reader and a process that is more than a little thrilling to observe.

The books are basically detective stories, but while they play that game extremely skillfully and very amusingly, they are at the same time subversively and cleverly testing and nudging the barriers between the crime story form, which is supposedly based on reality, and the horror story, which unabashedly rises out of blatantly fantastic assumptions. The books also—and in a very disturbing fashion—prod at the assumed differences between fictitious imaginings and the reader's (your) day-to-day life.



Juhan May begins a new series. The Boreal Moon Tale *with* Conqueror's Moon. *The cover painting is by Steve Stone*

As in many detective stories, a number of these novels tend to take place in the same created world and bring in continuing characters. The somewhat bleak Midwestern city of Millhaven, which is roughly based on Milwaukee, has become a familiar locale, the main detective, Tom Passmore, is a genius of the eccentric, solitary type with electronic trimmings. In ***Lost Boy Lost Girl*** (Random House, New York, 281 pp., hardcover, $24.95), Straub follows the wise precedence set by the likes of Arthur Conan Doyle and Rex Stout by having the brilliant mental machinations of his sleuth viewed from a protective distance through the eyes of a Dr. Watson/Archie Goodwin narrator, Tim Underhill, who is a successful novelist not at all unlike Peter Straub himself.

In *Lost Boy Lost Girl* Underhill is pulled back to Millhaven by the tragic death of his brother's wife and soon finds himself deeply entangled in increasingly sinister events leading up to and following the disappearance of his nephew, Mark Underhill, after the boy becomes involved in an obsessive investigation of the extremely creepy, long-abandoned house of the awful Joseph Kalendar, a legendary and singularly loathsome local serial killer. Milltown is trying unsuccessfully to forget. Both the house and this book are riddled with secret panels and hidden stairways leading up to a multitude of concealed rooms containing piles and boxfuls of awesomely gruesome things. You will find them all genuinely scary (and I really do mean scary), but—following his new genre's basic technique of erasing the imagined sound boundaries between supposedly contrasting moods and notions—the horrors have a way of unexpectedly morphing into sweetness, the cruelties transform themselves to kindnesses, and bestial villainies surprise all concerned by becoming acts of extraordinary heroism. If you haven't had the pleasure and excitement of discovering and reading any of this new, very important development in Peter Straub's work, *Lost Boy Lost Girl* would be a fine way to get started.

I've always felt that ***The Complete Tolkien Companion*** (by J.E.A. Tyler, Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, New York, 715 pp., hardcover, $27.95) was the best all around basic reference guide to

Tolkien, and I'm delighted to see it's not only back in print but that it's been seriously revised and updated.

The material is organized in alphabetical order and presents well-thought-out, solid dissertations on pretty much every aspect of J.R.R. Tolkien's extraordinarily complex secondary universe. And not only are the various characters and objects and places well and accurately described, but they are intelligently and sensitively expounded upon.

A pleasing aspect of the book is to start the little essays on "foreign" terms with the word boldly written in its own proper alphabet. And many a tedious, all-night-long altercation between packer addicts will be avoided—or at least somewhat shortened—by the calming study of one of the clear-cut genealogical tables available within this book ... although I darkly suspect there may be problems regarding those bits where the family trees are connected by dotted lines that indicate conjectural generational descent.

I have never once failed to be very satisfied by an inquiry into the original *The Complete Tolkien Companion* and I'm happy to report that a number of determined forays on your behalf into this updated version have convinced me that its magical powers not only continue in full force, but they have been noticeably strengthened. Put it on the shelf next to your *Red Book of Westmarch*.

In all honesty I must confess I was just a tiny bit dubious when I came across this little compendium of essays by a widely varied collection of professors of philosophy discussing their views of J.R.R. Tolkien's work as it touches on their special field of interest, but I felt it was part of my duty as a reviewer for this magazine to read through it and it pleases me to report that I think ***The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy: One Book To Rule Them All*** (edited by Gregory Bassham and Eric Bronson, Open Court, Chicago and La Salle, 240 pp., trade paperback, $17.95) is both stimulating and expanding and a lot of fun to boot.

The essays and the scholars who wrote them are an extremely varied lot and, like me, I expect you'll probably find you like some of them and their writings better than others. I think you'll discover that even the ones you might seriously quibble with succeed in jogging you in various interesting ways and that the others may skillfully manage to light a bulb or two in your skull which heretofore only flickered dimly or never glowed at all.

The layout of the book is well done. It starts—as it certainly should—with meditations on the moral, practical, and emotional implications of the Rings of Power; moves on to examine some of Tolkien's notions regarding life well lived; has three professors brood on (note the capitals) Good and Evil, calls upon another three to chew over time and mortality, and wraps up in a highly appropriate manner by having a final clump of them opine intriguingly upon "Ends and Endings."

It's highly likely that you will find your own special interest touched upon. Be you environmentalist, Buddhist, business person, politician, scientist, or historian, this sizable convocation of intelligent scholars will likely force you to reconsider, or at least more deeply mull, your convictions and beliefs. I know I found myself returning to the book in my lap from a half-hour or so of thoughtful reflection quite a number of times, and I am enjoying rethinking no small number of my premises on a number of things Tolkienesque and otherwise. If I taught in some some middle or high school I believe I'd seriously consider tossing this book at my students.

My guess is that Tolkien would have very much enjoyed this book and that you will too.

Speaking of matters philosophical: Congratulations—that time of year has rolled around again and you have yet another chance to buy the ***Zippy Annual*** (drawn and written by Bill Griffith, Fantographics Books, Seattle, 127 pp., softcover, $19.95)!

Join Zippy the Pinhead as he travels the length and breadth of this great nation of ours and—among other trenchant activities—observes and comments on America's vast resource of roadside statues stretching proudly from Coney Island (one of the main attractions in this particular issue) to Los Angeles. Some of these oversize bits of pop art are active and some are passive, some few of them are as silent as Egypt's magnificent Sphinx (arguably the greatest roadside attraction of all time, when you come to think about it), but most of them are quite vocal and often extremely illuminating regarding their complex relationships with passersby.

Of course Zippy himself is the main philosopher. In this fourth annual he is particularly inspired by the replicating statue of a large fork stabbing a large chunk of what I take to be a piece of meat which stands by a replicating statue of a large sidewalk fire hydrant and he says (and I quote) "My sense of reality isn't what it used to be. Of course reality isn't what it used to be .. If reality would be what it used to be, maybe I'd have a better sense of it. But then I'd be out of touch with reality."

If that irritates you instead of making you feel better about coping with the business of being alive, perhaps you'd be well advised not to purchase this book.

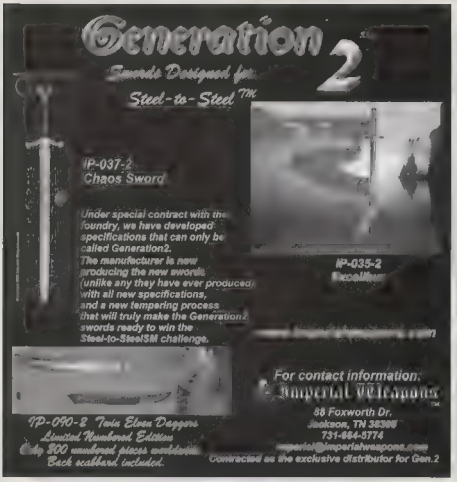
Gahan Wilson

The Knight, Gene Wolfe, Tor, New York hardcover, 432 pp., $25.95, ISBN. 0-765-30989-0.

Gene Wolfe is a writer who can make me gasp with admiration and shiver with pleasure, he is also a writer who can make me seethe with frustration. His hyperconscious, hyperintelligent fictions are intricate puzzles of meaning, memory, and identity set up with an almost preternatural degree of control. Like the works of Vladimir Nabokov, they demand close reading and repay it a hundredfold. A convert to Catholicism, Wolfe makes no secret of his religious beliefs and their importance to his work. Yet one need not share his faith to find his fiction rewarding. Despite the difficulty of his fiction, or because of it, Wolfe is an intensely compassionate artist, writing to, as Milton put it, "justify the ways of god to man."

In furtherance of this aim, Wolfe has developed an extraordinarily limpid style, working toward a simplicity of surface expression that communicates action, setting, and character concisely and precisely while affording readers dizzying glimpses into profound depths of ontological and epistemological mystery. Wolfe takes with uncommon seriousness the commonplace notion that how a story is told should be inseparable from what the story is and who is telling it. His narrators, from Severian to Latro to Horn, are always unreliable, whether they realize it or not, and his plots are jigsawed through time and space, so that readers must constantly reevaluate what they know or think they know.

The Knight is the story of a teenage boy from the present or near future of our world who is transported into a magical realm based largely on Norse mythology. The boy receives a new name, Sir Able of the High Heart (we never learn his old one) and sets off on two related quests. The first is to find a magic sword, Eterne, which he believes will win him the love of Disin, Queen of the Moss Aelf. The second, more obscure, is to tell someone—neither we nor he are sure who—of certain unspecified wrongs done to the Aelf. Both prove difficult. First, Sir Able of the High Heart (and let's just remark that this pussant, can-do moniker is bundled with allusions to Abel, murdered by his older brother, Cain, and the Hart, a beast of heraldry with associations to Christ) doesn't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remember much about his life on Earth. He knows he has an older brother called Ben, and he knows his parents are dead, but that's about it. He remembers slipping into Aelfrice, the kingdom of the Aelf, while chasing a floating castle in the sky, and he knows, or suspects, that he has spent many years there and that the Aelf have both given him knowledge and taken it away. Second, Sir Able is just a teenager. Even though a tryst with Disin leaves him with the body of a grown man, inside he remains a raw youth, an adolescent with all the annoying traits of the species (as is also the case in *The Book of Knights*, by Yves Meynard, to whom Wolfe's book is dedicated). Third, he keeps meeting people who aren't who or even what they appear to be and getting involved in side quests involving giants, ogres, and dragons. And fourth, the world in which Sir Able finds himself is dangerous and unfriendly, with a rigid social structure that views him as base-born, undeserving of the title of knight, and a hierarchical cosmology that proves mystifyingly fluid.

There are seven worlds, or planes of existence, stacked one atop the other. The first and highest is not given a name. After that comes Kleos, a realm of angels (although there is but one overt intrusion of Christianity into the novel, a cross that Sir Able erects over a grave). Below that is Skai, home of the floating castle and the Vafather (i.e. Valhalla and Odin). Below that lies Mythgarthr, where most but not all of Sir Able's adventures take place. Some take place in Aelfrice, the world below Mythgarthr, and some in Muspel, which is under Aelfrice. The lowest world, like the highest, is not named.

These planes interpenetrate to a degree. A creature can descend from higher to lower, though getting back again might prove difficult, like swimming upstream. Any climb from lower to higher is accompanied by an apparent loss of reality on the part of the climber (really, he, she, or it is simply climbing into a place *more real* than they are) and a jump of two levels is all but impossible, although eating the flesh of a creature of a higher level appears to endow one with the attributes of that level … enough, anyway, to exist there for a time. Thus a dragon of Muspel, for example, can climb on its own to Aelfrice, where it is less real, less powerful, and cannot climb to Mythgarthr (or higher) at all unless it dines upon someone or something natural to that place. Here, as in many of his books, Wolfe spins variations on the theme of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Not only are things more real the higher you go, but they are purer, so that absolute good can be situated in the topmost world and absolute evil in the bottom. The worlds in between, and those dwelling there, are characterized by a mix of good and evil, one or the other predominating the more one

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nses or sinks. Further, the creatures of the worlds below Mythgarthr, at least, are shape-changers, and interbreeding can occur among creatures of varying levels, so that characters such as the intriguing, and possibly satanic, Setr exist—"a dragon with a human father," as Sir Able identifies him in a preface set out for his brother Ben's use (the whole book is a letter Able is writing to Ben). As a final complication, the creatures of the worlds above are or were once the gods of those in the worlds immediately below.

Sir Able must figure out the implications of this rich and confusing cosmology as he goes, and readers likewise. But gradually, inevitably, we gain the impression that Sir Able is the central player in a conflict that spans all the worlds. What that conflict might be, and what his role in it is, are questions not answered in this volume. Whether the next will answer them satisfactorily, or will fail to successfully address and resolve its inherited complications, I look forward to discovering.

My sole quibble lies with the narrator. Wolfe's main weakness as a writer would be crippling in any other genre, that is, an inability to write believable contemporary characters. His style is suited to archaisms of speech and manner, or to a heightened simplicity of both, or to baroque embellishments of the same. But when it comes to writing a character who talks and acts and thinks like a contemporary human being, he falls short. Sir Able seems a boy from an earlier America, perhaps the late nineteenth or early twentieth century; he is not a boy who knows about the Internet, computer games, MTV, or girls. Or, for that matter, about J.R.R. Tolkien or J.K. Rowling. Could it be that the Aelf have stripped such memories from him? Yes... but that is a graceless solution. The few times Wolfe throws in a modern reference, such as when Sir Able comments on the lack of any "TV or Mac," made me wince. Now, is it possible that this is also part of Wolfe's grand design? I suppose it is. And I look forward to discovering that, too.

Conqueror's Moon: Book One in The Boreal Moon Tale, Julian May, Ace, New York, hardcover, 400 pp., $24.95, ISBN 0-441-01132-2

Julian May's new novel, *Conqueror's Moon*, is set on High Blenholme Island, a far flung outpost of human habitation halfway between a civilized mainland and a terra incognita where monsters dwell. Many of these monsters—Salka, Green Men, Small Lights, and Beaconfolk, all of whom May derives from familiar Celtic and Nordic wights, and all more or less inimical to humans—are present on High Blenholme, especially in its northernmost regions. Conquered and colonized some centuries prior to our story, the island has since fractured into four kingdoms: Cathra, Dolion, Tarn, and Moss.

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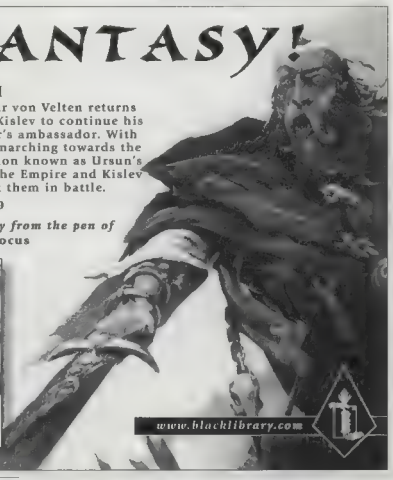

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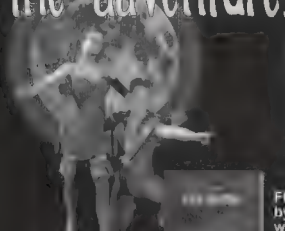

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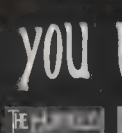

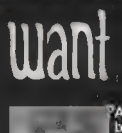

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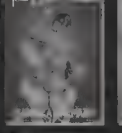

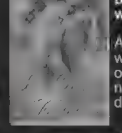

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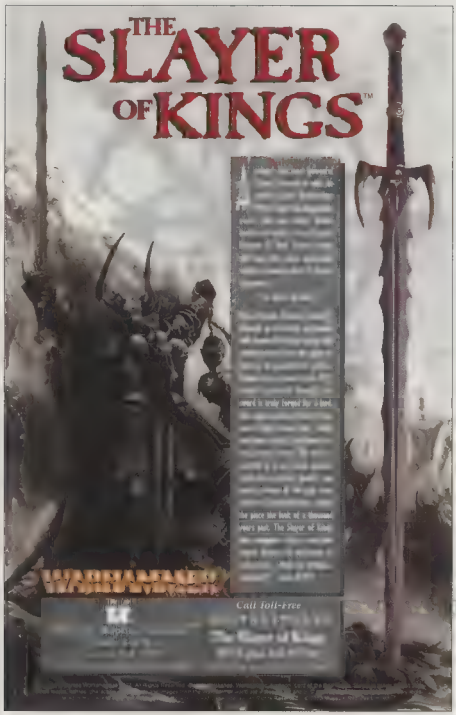

through the disciplines and rituals of an organized religion, the Brotherhood of Zeth. But some people manifest these powers without religious intervention: so-called "wild" talents. Such a one is Deveron Austrey, our narrator, dubbed Snudge by Conrig, who employs him from a young age as his spy and assassin.

Snudge is writing the tale of his and Conrig's youthful exploits from the vantage of old age, with Conrig long dead and Snudge himself exiled from court to live out his final days in disgrace. However after a brief prologue in which Snudge introduces himself, delivers a lecture in history and geography, and otherwise sets the stage he becomes merely another character in his tale, which he relates from the omniscient point of view, granting himself privileged access to the private thoughts and feelings of other characters far beyond anything his talents could possibly have provided him. This bothered me for it seemed a case of May having her cake and eating it too, rather than a narrative strategy arising out of Snudge's unique abilities and circumstances. Indeed, it soon seems as if May forgets who is narrating the story, or perhaps the prologue was added as an afterthought. In any case, it makes for sloppy writing.

Still, there is much to enjoy here. Snudge is an appealing hero: resourceful, intelligent and brave. And May handles the eldritch sphere with admirable restraint: its denizens remain frightening, powerful enigmas of whom we long to know more.

The Thackery T. Lambshead Pocket Guide to Eccentric & Discredited Diseases, Dr. Jeff Vandermeer & Dr. Mark Roberts, eds. Night Shade Books, Portland, trade paperback, 286 pp, $24.00, ISBN 1 [illegible]

Here's a book that *can* be judged by its cover. The art by John Coulthart, is gorgeous, evocative and strange: qualities shared by a good number of the case histories within. This compendium of bizarre diseases, which run the gamut from the hilarious (Motile Snarcoma), to the surreal (Fruiting Body Syndrome), to the profoundly unsettling (Tian Shan-Gobi Assimilation), boasts what is surely the most distinguished group of writers to grace any recent anthology, among them Paul Di Filippo, Cory Doctorow, Jeffrey Ford, Neil Gaiman, China Miéville, Alan Moore, and our own Gahan Wilson. But the book is more than just another fictional disease anthology. Through detailed letters and reminiscences relating to the life of Dr. Lambshead, it takes on the kind of obsessive metareality one finds in the work of outsider artists. Editors Jeff Vandermeer and Mark Roberts have produced what should by all rights become a bedside classic, beloved by insomniacs and hypochondriacs of every stripe and spot.

Paul Witcover

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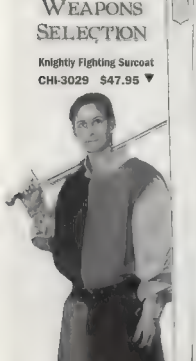

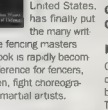

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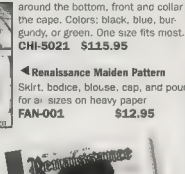

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From the Fairy Tale Handbook:

Lesson One: In order to rescue the the Princess, the Prince must first determine if she wants to be rescued.

Lesson Two: Behave accordingly.

Stuck in a Tower HIGH

By Pamela D. Lloyd Illustration by Laurie Harden

Sleeping Beauty dozes in her turret, high above the city. She has an MBA, wears power suits, and carries a cell phone, which she speaks into in short, clipped sentences. Her office is on the top floor of a high rise office building. Throughout the building are hundreds of staff people, each keeping busy at his or her task. None of them are awake.

Just life as normal.

Prince Charming drives a Harley and never stays long in the same place. He has just arrived from Chicago, where he ate ribs dripping in barbecue sauce, listened to Jazz late into the night, and sped around the lakeside drives, laughing as the wind whupped his long hair into stinging adders.

He's looking for the high-rise with the hedge of thorns.

The Bad Fairy is Sleeping Beauty's supervisor. *She's* wide awake. Periodically, the Bad Fairy picks up the phone and calls Sleeping Beauty. When she does this, she always has some little niggling question, or asks Sleeping Beauty to do some mundane task not in her job description. During each of these brief conversations she drops small, barbed tidbits, a tiny trail of hyp notic breadcrumbs that suggest a wondrous reward while also hinting of dire consequences should Sleeping Beauty not meet her standards.

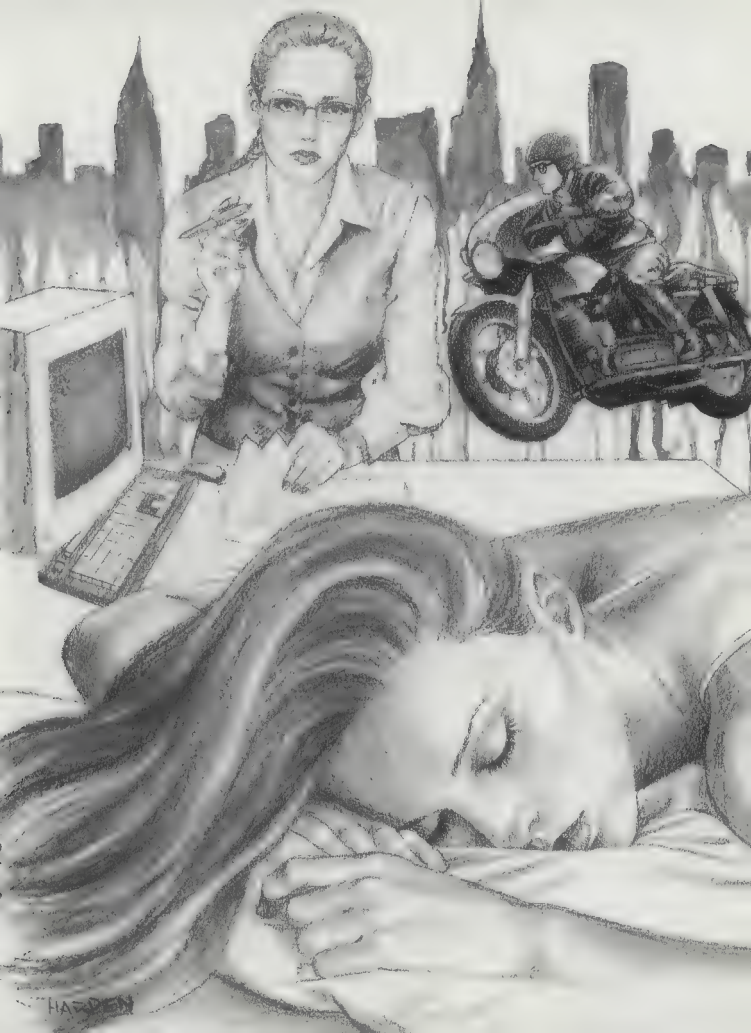
She always ends her conversations with, "Have a nice day."

At night, Sleeping Beauty comes down from her high-rise office building and rides a taxi to a high rise apartment building. When she lies down and closes her eyes, she dreams of what life was like before she went to sleep. She dreams of time, free time, without clocks or alarms or deadlines. She dreams of wearing light, airy clothes, or jeans and t-shirts without shoes. She dreams of walking through parks eating ice cream, of flying kites, and singing songs in her slightly off key voice.

During her days, which feel a hundred years long, she never remembers these dreams.

Sleeping Beauty's fairy godmother lives in Kansas, where she teaches high school. She remembers how Beauty, blessed with grace, looks, and brains, was cursed. She watched as Sleeping Beauty grew restless and dissatisfied, certain that if she could just earn enough money or have enough power—or better yet both—somehow life would be better.

Continued on page 78


HAGEN

A thing of beauty is a joy forever, and what better way to enjoy it than eternal life? Or so one might think

Israbel

ISRABEL RAN THROUGH THE STREETS OF Tyre. The cobbles were sooty with filth and here the city was made of thick clay bats. Israbel was sixteen—probably, who could be quite sure? Her mother was long dead, her father always unknown. Somewhere behind her was [illegible] a man with his belt drawn off, as a sword to smite her with. Israbel ran.

The narrow streets were mostly empty, for night was coming. A fellow with a torch went by to light the lamps along the front of some tavern. Wet clothes, as strings, shot across the alleys, or slunk over the roofs above.

When Israbel turned a corner into the Place du Coeur, she still not known [illegible]

[illegible] to cross her path. This cat was not like others. It was very big, the size, she was afterwards to believe, of a mouse. Though the light was gone, some peculiar sheen on the darkness showed her the faint dapplings along its back, which was longer than that of an ordinary feline, and the narrow head on its head. Its eyes were luminous and grey, a [illegible] of the light. It stopped.

She too stopped, [illegible] the thought, confusedly, *it's escaped from the great circus up at Montmartre.* Israbel had heard of a circus, that it had many curiosities, including bobtailed people and beasts of varied appearance and characteristics.

By Tanith Lee
Illustration by Patrick J. [illegible]

Dr. John Rattue, who cleaned up for

She was not afraid of the cat. That is not more afraid of it than of the darkness the sadist she had escaped, the world, everything. And so, she did not, now, run away, only stood watching it, as it stood also watching *her*.

A hundred years later when Israbel, still sixteen, rich, lovely, and, in her own way, dangerous, came occasionally to explain about the great cat, she would always add, "Its pelt was so soft and warm, so smooth and plush, like the double velvets of Venice. Like my hair, you say? Well perhaps very like that. But truly, its pelt was much better than my hair."

SHE IS THE WOMAN I intend to be my wife.'

Plinta stared, a moment. He thought, *Your wife? And then, She looks like an insect. Oh a beautiful insect—some sort of exquisite beetle, with gilded black wings.*

Really?" he said.

"You don't approve."

Plinta shivered—but unseen, inside his mind.

Does it matter to you that I approve?"

"Well, no."

By then, the woman—the *creature*—was approaching them, slipping between the candlelit marbles of the salon.

Dumière held out his hands. She paused, smiling, and took neither.

Good evening, my love," said Dumière. "May I present my friend, Monsieur Plinta, the painter."

She looked at Plinta.

Her eyes were like a flash of blackness seen through blue smoke.

Yes, she was beautiful. A perfect, sculpted face, large dark eyes—blue?—black?—whose lids were just barely touched with kohl, a long aquiline nose (perhaps she was a Jewess?), a wonderful mouth, not large—yet full, and capable of lengthening its shape—blushed either with rouge or uncommon good health.

She was not young. That is, she was about twenty-five or so, Plinta thought. Not that, physically, she seemed much older than sixteen. Yet her eyes knew things. Perhaps her clear and unlined eyes were even older—thirty, forty—*fifty?*

Plinta, the artist, now realized why he had thought of her pictorially and specifically as a beetle. Her black dress, wrapped her closely, thrusting up a velvet glimpse of breasts, holding her corseted waist like two tight ebony hands ringed with gold. Her hair, too, which she wore partly loose, was quilled and rayed with gold—wings.

He thought, distinctly, *She is a vampire.*

"Madame," he said, and bowed.

"Oh, but, Monsieur," she said. "I'm not married."

"Not yet," agreed Dumière. Now he reached out and took hold of her, like the tight hands of her dress on her waist. "Come on, let's dance."

As he led her away, she glanced back once, and directly into Plinta's eyes.

What was her name? Had Dumière not told him?

THE NEXT EVENING, as Plinta, who had just left his bed, lay on the sofa reading the morning's journals and drinking bitter coffee, his shambling servant Colas showed Israbel into the studio.

Plinta did not get up. Then he thought he had better, to be rude was too obvious. So he rose. But, when he did that, she laughed at him.

She said, "I saw last night, Monsieur Plinta, you'd penetrated my disguise."

Today she wore very dark blue-green, with a lemon plume in her hat. She was still like a beautiful beetle. Or maybe a lizard—

"Disguise? I didn't know you'd worn fancy dress, madame."

"Oh yes, of course. Always. But you saw right through to me, didn't you? As if I were—naked."

Plinta felt at once an unmistakable and vivid surge of lust. Positioned high in his own brain, he looked down at the lust, tingling and flaring about in his body, and said, cautiously, "I don't know what you mean, madame."

"I'm not madame. I have only one name. Israbel. Under that name I sometimes sing and act at the *Opéra*."

Very well," he said. "Please sit down."

She too, he sensed, saw right through *him*. She knew what he felt still. felt. She knew, too, he was still in command of himself.

Israbel seated herself. She drew off the plumed hat, and her hair fell all around her, down to her waist. There were no longer golden quills and spangles in it, yet it glittered with strange gilding.

"I want you," she said. "to paint my portrait."

"You honor me. Alas, I'm very busy."

"No, you are not. You haven't had a commission, nor any paid work, for eighteen months. You mustn't forget, I know Dumière, who knows *you*."

"Dumière doesn't know everything about me, I'm afraid."

"No. You're a secretive man. But your painting is interesting. Wouldn't you like me to sit for you?"

"Frankly, Madame Israbel—"

"You wouldn't," she finished for him.

The door opened. In blundered Colas with more wood for the stove, for it was a chilly evening. Israbel watched Colas, then she turned her eyes back to Plinta. And, annoyed, he realized he had been hungry for their return to him, sulky in the split second of her looking away.

Colas banged the stove door shut again and lumbered out. Like two interrupted lovers, they resumed their murmured conversation.

Dumière may have told you, monsieur, I'm well-off. I can pay you handsomely for your portrait of myself."

"Why do you want such a portrait?"

She said without hesitation. "I'd like to look at it. I'd like to see myself in it."

And, before he could quite stop himself, if he had even meant to stop himself, Plinta added, "That being because a portrait is the only way you ever *could* see yourself. Am I correct, madame? You don't reflect in mirrors."

Israbel smiled once more. It was difficult to take your gaze away from her mouth—unless you looked into her eyes, and then you could only look at those.

"I note you understand my predicament, monsieur," she said, as if they had spoken of something dull.

Plinta decided not to reply.

Israbel got up, and as she did so, even clothed in her fashionable Parisian dress, something fell from her like a seventh veil.

"Others are fooled, of course," she remarked. "It is commonly thought no one can make out a vampire in a mirror. But naturally anyone can see us reflected there—save only we, ourselves."

"Then you have kindred?" said Plinta, between wonder and alarm.

"Perhaps—but I've met none of them. No, no, I'm quite alone. I speak of them

"Oh, her skin's soft and smooth, her hair's a marvel, she has a special scent she wears—like spice—her body is lithe as a snake's."

only in the historical and mythic sense I belong, you understand, monsieur, to an ancient sisterhood, brotherhood, packed with persons. Except I've never met any of them.

Then how did you become what you are?" Plinta asked, inevitably.

If I tell you that, will you paint me? Will you give me my mirror Monsieur Plinta?

He turned his back and walked off to the window.

Standing by the frozen glass, he gazed down at the icy, barely lit streets running toward the River Seine, the bell-clanging local church, then, to the sky like black lead. But talking to her was a game he seemed unable to give up playing.

Why do you want to see yourself, madame? Anyone else's face can tell you now beautiful you are.

Not yours," she said.

Plinta lurched inside his skin. In utter silence, she had drawn physically close to him. Her narrow hand was on his shoulder. Almost as tall as he, she leaned to his ear. "I'll tell you my story anyway," she murmured, "perhaps.

Plinta did not move. He wondered if she would sink her teeth, or some other blood-letting implement, into his neck. But he felt only her perfumed warmth and then a coldness, and turning, he saw she was once more seated far off across the studio, her feet stretched out to the stove, drinking coffee like an ordinary human woman.

She did not appear at the *Opéra* very often. When she did, she always took some small cameo part, usually limited to a single appearance lasting maybe five minutes, during which she sang an aria by Handel, Rameau, or Voulé. Her voice was good, if not especially brilliant, but nevertheless, a great hush would grip the theater while she voiced her lines and sang her music. She was always rapturously applauded, and flowers rained on the stage.

She was said to have slept with some of the richer or more notorious patrons—bankers, poets, that sort. None of them had ever seemed any the worse for it. That is, none of them mysteriously died or otherwise disappeared. None of them, perhaps, more to the point, metamorphosed in any way. They merely went on with their own earthbound lives, long after they parted from her.

Men did become infatuated, of course. One had drowned himself. Plinta thought. Plinta had never paid her name much attention, not even seen her, until Dumière became in turn obsessed by her.

Dumière took Plinta to dinner at the Cafe d'Orléans. Here they ate oysters and various roasted meats and drank wine and liqueurs. Dumière spoke mostly—solely—of Israbel. Plinta, to his own consterna[illegible] looks into a mirror. I bought her one, you [illegible], a gorgeous thing from Italy, silvered [illegible], gilt cupids—she stood in front of [illegible] nearly half an hour. Staring in at herself. [illegible] She had such a puzzled look—as if [illegible] look—as if she were searching for some[illegible]thing she couldn't find—I wonder what.

Her soul, Plinta thought.

Worse than Dumière's invented cage-[illegible]house, a door slammed in Plinta's heart then, trapping him inside with Israbel.

ISRABEL TOLD PLINTA at once she wished to pose for him in the nude.

This, rather than excite, made cool sense to him. After all, if she wanted to see *herself*—which no mirror could now ever show her—she wanted to see her flesh, *not* her *clothes*—she need only look into her wardrobe to behold those.

When she came out naked to the lamps from behind the studio screen, [illegible] noted, unsurprised, her body was beautiful. For Plinta had seen the beautiful undad bodies of women—and men—often in his trade.

What moved him was Israbel herself. Her gestures, expressions. Even the sound of her voice. For she would talk to him as he began his sketches.

Her voice was pleasant, [illegible] elusive, too. Neither young nor old, barely even feminine. A slightly tarnished silver voice, to vie with the gold glints in her eyes and hair.

He found her easy to capture on paper. [illegible] presently discovered. Brief, [illegible] were simple—cream and black, [illegible] highlights of turquoise, ruby, [illegible] stones, like shining metals. But her red mouth burned for him.

What would it be like—not to kiss—but to be *bitten* by the teeth of that burning mouth?

Plinta recalled [illegible] before, of the casting of a seventh veil—the provocative act of a dancer. Salomé, it had been as if Israbel *cast a skin*.

She had not yet, despite her pledge, told him the tale of how she became what he knew she was, a vampire, who lived on the blood of others. But, for that matter, he did not know when or how she took blood. She had never approached him in any way, either in seduction or [illegible]. Naturally, she would want the [illegible] completed to her satisfaction.

However, one day he would finish.

He actually considered, twice, following her when she left the studio, to see her method of predation. Yet he never did.

What would he do if she suddenly turned her attentions on him? Would he allow her his blood? Would he be able to prevent her?

He was not afraid of Israbel. He was not in love with her. But obsessed, he was

Intellectually and artistically at least as much as physically and in his emotions

A winter dusk brought her early, while a thick sunfall bubbled behind the church like sweet apricot preserves

The painting was almost done, and he permitted her, when she asked, to see it She had never asked before

She stood a long while staring at it, just as Dumière—whom, now, Plinta had not seen for two months—had described with the costly cupid mirror. For one awful second, Plinta thought perhaps she could not see herself in the painted picture, *either*—it was a very exact likeness

Then she said, "Oh thank God. There I am again. Oh, yes. Thank God

"Do you know, can you guess," she whispered presently, when he had sat her down, wrapped her furs about her, given her cognac, "what it's like—*never again to see your own self?* Oh, there are whole peoples, I know, who never have mirrors and so never look into them—but even so—they may see a reflection in some surface And here in this city—a polished tabletop—window—a pool Thank of me, I was so young. Gazing instead at my hands—my feet—my *shadow*—because my shadow I still have—trying to remember myself from that I pulled my hair across my eyes, too, and looked at my hair. But myself—my face, my eyes, my mouth—forever gone All of *you* could see them, *all of you*—all save I myself And they were *mine*"

"The penalty for everything else you've gained," he said. Was this harsh? No, only a fact

"True," she said "Nevertheless, I have outwitted the penalty, or I *shall* do so With the help of Plinta the Painter. Do you know, Plinta, the oddest thing—I'd only seen myself four or five times in any case, before I lost the ability to view my own reflection. In my—shall I even say *home*?—in the slum where I was born, there were few mirrors Despite that, as I've said—once in a windowpane, and once a table polished with my hand—and once in a pool of rainwater in a gutter and once in the side of a bottle—but once a man gave me a piece of looking-glass I looked, and truly saw myself, and he said, *Now you do as I say, or I'll cut that face you see across with my razor* I did what he said He still took off his belt to beat me I hadn't pleased him, you understand That was when I ran This, Plinta, was about a hundred, a hundred and seven years ago It was in the era just before the Revolution. Paris was raw and smarting, not yet seething—I didn't notice The city was like a model made of wet newspaper Unreal. And I must only escape. So, I escaped, as you see

He said "You became what you are now

Then she told him

I had approached her so suddenly and so swiftly, seeming to move as if on wheels, that Israbel had had no time to think, or to decide after all once more to run away. Next second, its body touched her.

The body of the cat was warm, she said, as a hearth, or a summer stone, and its [illegible] electric life. The instant they were in contact, a vast soothing, in fact a feeling of *content*, flooded Israbel. "It was like the first time I ever tasted good brandy."

The Place du Coeur was now, she said, [illegible] and built over. Alleys attenuated from [illegible] the Ile de la Cité

Israbel remembered only this, walking very fast with the great cat, whose neck was long and who was as tall as she, both it and she unseen and incredibly unnoted, through shadows and night. Before them there blazed lights shone in the [illegible] Sometimes loud shouts of laughter, rage, or merriment flowed round the [illegible] like that seemed divided by their passage like a river, which they swam together she and the cat, effortlessly. They came [illegible] before the Cathedral

Notre Dame, Our Lady of Paris, was [illegible] red. In her windows, dark blue fires and rubies. Far above, her demonic gargoyles [illegible] should strike in some other dimension and let them loose

[illegible] under the street. She could not say exactly *how* it drew her. It was as if she had become invisibly connected to its skin, the [illegible] led her along like a benevolent leash.

What did I think or feel? I was only half [illegible] the dark. If instead it had somehow [illegible] Cathedral, I couldn't have been afraid.

In the cavern—no, she had sometimes [illegible] Dame, never found it, nor any entrance to it—was the leopard's lair. The stone floor was dry and thick with straw and rushes [illegible] yet clean, faintly tinged with the incense of Notre Dame, freshened by little cracks and [illegible] wholesome as the rest

She lay down [illegible] the cat, which [illegible] forelegs, the paws resting [illegible] without a hint of talons. It breathed into her face. And its breath was healthy and clean, and smelled only a little salty.

Some of those I tell this story ass, if the cat then ravished me, as lions can be trained to do with human women. Yet no [illegible] the arms of my mother or a father who loved me tenderly. I never felt so secure, nor have I ever after. So I slept, my head on one of the huge arms, against the [illegible] hymn of its breathing.

Israbel paused. This hiatus went on and on.

Plinta said finally, "And then"

She sighed. "I woke up. It was twilight. I felt well and strong, as if I'd eaten [illegible]

And as if I'd bathed in hot scented water—that was how I now smelled. I wasn't under the city anymore. I was on a back street against a wall, out of sight, where it must have taken me when I was done. I might have dreamed every thing, but for knowing I was glad it was not daytime, and for the sense of well being of *vitality*—neither of which have ever left me since. Even so, I started to cry. I ran about, trying to find the way back down to my beloved friend—for yes, the great cat had become my only friend and all the family I had. Of course I detected no way and not a single clue [illegible] instead, my own—no, *human* kind—discovered me. And so I learned my powers over them, what I could do and gain, what I had become

"A vampire."

"An immortal thing. Naturally limited to the night, but otherwise able to [illegible] she wishes. And fed—*cherished*—by mortal blood"

Plinta roused himself. He felt cold and sleepy, inert and depressed, all the opposites of what she had described her own feelings to be.

"But how had—this cat—taken your blood—how had it refashioned you"

"Do you really wish to know"

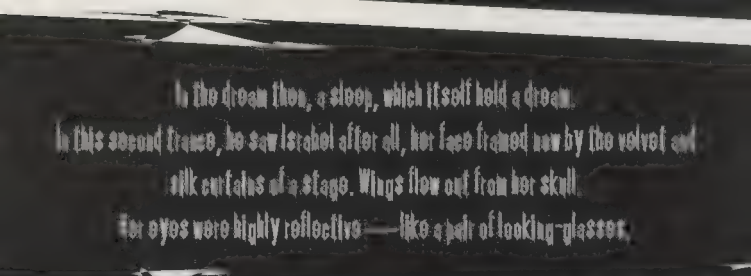
"Yes."

Israbel lowered her eyes of black [illegible] said, low voice, "The beautiful fur of it, every fiber leached every atom of my blood away and filled me in return with the ichor of the vampire race

"Its *fur*"

[illegible] down the studio, rubbing circulation back into numbed arms and hands, stoo [illegible] stove. The room seemed hot—yet he was freezing.

When he happened to glance at the clock, he was astounded. Two hours had


In the dream then, a sleep, which itself held a dream.
In this second trance, he saw Israbel after all, her face framed now by the velvet and
silk curtains of a stage. Wings flew out from her skull.
Her eyes were highly reflective — like a pair of looking-glasses.

moment he looked at her now, she too got up. She had not taken off any but her outer garments, the furs. It seemed she did not, tonight, mean to pose for her portrait.

Certainly she did not, for she said then, Monsieur, your picture of me is all I could ever hope for. You've given me a very special gift. Now I shall pay you.

It isn't finished!" Plinta exclaimed. He himself heard the panic in his tone. It was not only the unfinished painting that troubled him. It seemed their commerce, hers and his, was at an end.

But Israbel only nodded gravely.

Not quite finished, I agree. But that's as it should be—as it *must* be, don't you think. For neither am I, monsieur, *finished*. Nor, perhaps can I ever be. The picture has reached the very stage I myself am at. Like me, it must remain there, or how can I see myself in it?"

Plinta stood still. He stared at Israbel, memorizing her, her grace, elegance, and otherness.

"And *so*," she said gently, "let me settle my account with you."

I don't know," he said, "what this picture can be worth."

"Everything."

Do I ask everything of you, then?

"You know that I'm rich."

Don't pay me," he said, "in money."

Then how?

As she questioned him like that, Plinta saw in her a total fatal innocence. It had nothing to do with naiveté or foolishness. *I must never lose her.* Aloud he said, "Show me."

"Ah."

"Show me how—*pelt*—can take blood—*how you feed yourself*."

The crudeness of the words he had used, and his desire to find out, both appalled him. He was humiliated by himself, and trembling, but even so would not deny what he had said.

She answered, "If you wish. But—I'm hungry, Plinta, Monsieur Plinta the Painter. If it's to be you—"

"*Me*. Who *else*?

Then I shan't hold back. You must become as I am. Do you want such a thing?

Plinta thought about it. But he had been thinking of it constantly, behind a screen of debate arguing with himself that in fact, it was not possible. But it was.

Madame Israbel, I have so much to learn of my trade. That alone would need immortality. I'd like the time. I don't subscribe to the idea that, being always myself, I must become less. I think one must be able to *evolve*—even in the same continuing body. Yes, I'd give up the daylight. But I too am already partly nocturnal. I sleep through a day, rise at sunset. But more than that—I want to *know*—"

Israbel turned her head. This was as if she listened, obediently, to some angel at her right shoulder, who now told her what she must do. It seemed she knew the angel of old. Its advice was always sound.

Before, he had seen a seventh veil fall from her.

Now Israbel touched the bodice of her dress, and the yellow silk parted and dropped, like a veil, and all else with it. As before, she stood in front of him naked. Her hair, loose and gleaming, framed her face, neck, and upper body.

Plinta felt a stab of sexual appetite so intense it hurt him. Then he grasped it was not sexual at all.

She came to him as her kind did, as the great cat had come to her: sudden and swift, gliding as if over burnished ice.

And as she came, her hair, her *hair* lifted up on her head in two wide, black-flaming wings, glittering with tines and prisms of diamond, topaz, and gold, and as it fastened on him, and her flesh met his own clothed body, he felt the touch of her, hair, skin, her eyes, her lips. Oh, not like mother or father. This was like the meeting of mortal man with God.

PLINTA SEEMED TO LIE that night high up on the roofs of the Cathedral, among the army of gargoyles which, as a white moon rose, flew back and forth, scratching their claws on the parapets, their eyes full of misty smoldering.

Here, Israbel took his blood, not biting but through her skin and her hair, the soft persuasive caresses ebbing and swelling like a symphony.

He understood that, in the future, he too must take sustenance in this way. But *her* hair, so long and thick, had become two wings, like those of some giant Egyptian hawk. She too, he saw, as he lay quiet between the delicious bouts of her feeding, flew off the roof, into the sky and stars. Sometimes she even gripped the gargoyles, held them, while both they and she soared across the moon, her hair coiling them, their tails wrapped around her. Did she take blood also from their carved stone, replacing it with immortal vampiric essences? Of course, how else were they able to fly?

Near dawn she closed his eyes with her lips, a kind of kiss.

Sleep now. Be at peace. Asleep, the sun can't harm you. Tomorrow night you will be changed.

Then tomorrow, where shall I meet you?" he said. But Plinta discovered he could not, now she had shut them, open his eyes, and she did not reply, and had drawn away. A colossal slumberousness stole over him. He sank into it, not minding.

In the dream then, a sleep, which itself held a dream. In this second trance he saw Israbel after all, her face framed now by the velvet and silk curtains of a stage. Wings flew out from her skull. Her eyes were highly reflective—like a pair of looking glasses. Otherwise, her face had no features at all. It was a *faceless* face, a perfect, blind face, of fabric stretched taut on bone.

Continued on page 76

WHAT MAKES A HERO? IS IT FINESSE WITH A SWORD? COURAGE IN THE FACE OF DANGER? OR IS IT SOMETHING DEEPER AND OLDER THAN THAT?

Cerok found the last body at the foot of an ancient oak tree. It was partially hidden beneath a snowdrift, its tiny eyes frozen and unseeing. He met the dead stare and wept as he had upon the discovery of each of the seven children. Brushing the snow from the corpse, he took it to his body, hoping the heat from his wool shirt would return it to life. A ridiculous notion, but it was evident that Cerok was far beyond rational thought.

"Children seven, cold 'neath the King's Snow," recited Hodgett. "The final condition of Maleth's prophecy fulfilled. I think, Cerok, that we would do well to increase our pace."

Cerok gripped the child tighter. He appeared not to have heard his companion's words. The fury of the blowing wind was such that the snowdrifts began to mass against Cerok as they had the body. His face was blistered red from the wind's bite and tiny ice crystals were forming in his thick beard. The scene gave Hodgett a chill inside his body to match the one without and he pulled the hood of his cloak tighter around his face.

Hodgett had witnessed Cerok's reaction to each of the previous deaths and judged they would travel no farther this day. He felt that Cerok's desire to bury each of the children was foolish in light of the stakes

involved. Their time was limited and the burials served only to diminish the chance of success. Hodgett would have done many things differently, but fate had made him the Witness and Cerok the Offered and it was not his place to contradict fate. His role was clear. With a sigh, he went about the task of making a fire. It wouldn't do for the Offered to freeze to death here.

As Hodgett scanned the underbrush for wood that would be dry enough to catch a flame, he noticed that Cerok had given up his illusions and placed

By Josh Rountree
Illustration by Eric Fortune

The King's Snow

the child back against the tree root. The lifeless boy continued to stare at the sky until Cerok closed his eyelids with a gentle touch.

Within an hour's time the sun had set and Hodgett's meager supply of firewood was ablaze. He sat patiently watching as Cerok drove the blade of his dagger repeatedly into the frozen ground. With every stroke the big man grunted as if in agony, only to raise the blade again and slam it savagely back to the ground. It had taken hours to dig each of the previous six graves, and those times Cerok had used his sword. Halfway through the sixth internment, the steel had snapped and Cerok had reached for his dagger to continue the task, hardly missing a stroke. Hodgett hoped that the dagger would hold out to finish this one. He felt no doubt that if it became necessary, Cerok would dig the next one with his fingers. "There won't be a next one," he said aloud to himself. "That was seven."

There was King Remmon's dagger, of course, covered in golden moon's eye stones and tucked safely away in the folds of Cerok's cloak, but its use for such a task was unthinkable. It had been entrusted to Cerok for conveyance to the place of offering. Hodgett felt that the King had chosen well. Cerok appeared firm in his resolve and his heart was truer than most.

Hodgett grew hungry and decided that if he waited for Cerok, he might well starve to death. Since their departure from Mountain Keep six days past, the quiet man had taken only what food and drink he found necessary for survival. He had spoken only in tired, hushed tones and labored with each step he took. Hodgett was not certain what weighed on Cerok the heaviest, the ultimate destination or the fact that tomorrow's path would carry them through Hunting Square.

Hodgett sat quietly eating the jerked beef he had stored in his pack. He didn't feel like hunting by himself and he had work ahead of *him* as well. When his meal was finished, he drank heavily from his wineskin and went about preparing his workspace. From his pack he pulled out a cloth of thin leather and unwound the twine that bound it. He opened the folds to reveal three jars of ink, an aging quill, and a few random pieces of parchment. Opening each of the jars in turn, he was greeted with the pungent smell of the plants used to color the substance. The smell of Tanner Weed was among his favorite and he inhaled heavily, savoring the aroma. His head became light for a second but slowly his mind cleared and he returned to the task at hand.

Again, he reached into his pack and this time produced a large book, intricately bound but without words or illustrations, save those he had committed to page during their journey. He surveyed his work to this point and found it to be adequate. His script wasn't anywhere near as elaborate as it could be; had he more time and an easier working environment, but it would suffice until he could produce finer copies.

Hodgett dipped the quill into the ink and, with a soft touch, began his daily chronicle of the Offered's journey. He found it cruel that fate had left six children in their path yesterday, but saved the final child for today. Yesterday, there was a spark of hope in Cerok's eyes as they made camp. If the prophecies weren't accurate, he'd said, perhaps there would be a recovery for the King. The discovery of the seventh body today ended that speculation. Cerok's temporary optimism had died and his stoic resolve had returned.

Since the King's Snow had begun, it was not uncommon to find an ill-fated traveler dead from the cold. Hodgett himself had passed a fabric merchant on his way to Mountain Keep, dead beneath his flat wagon in an apparent effort to escape the violent winds that arose without warning. His wares covered the bleak snowscape in an unnatural array of loud colors, blown to the tops of trees and shredded by the thorn bushes that just managed to protrude from beneath the blanket of fresh snow. His horse was not to be found and there was little hope of Hodgett finding the animal, certainly not alive.

Travel between cities had become so treacherous in the previous weeks that only a desperate few even attempted it and fewer still were prepared for what they would face. Therefore, it was highly unlikely that seven children would undertake such a journey, but here they were. This was proof from Great Suz that the path they followed was true, the task necessary. It was with the discovery of the seventh body that Hodgett truly began to believe everything the oracle had said. *Good*, he thought, *at least we aren't on a fool's errand.*

Hodgett was putting the lids back on the bottles of ink when Cerok lowered his tired body into a seated position on the opposite side of the campfire. He exhaled heavily, his breath visible in the chilled air, and Hodgett noticed that his body trembled with exertion.

"That was seven, Cerok," said Hodgett as he offered the man a piece of the dried meat.

"I know my numbers, Witness," he replied, ignoring the offered food. He spat the word *Witness* from his tongue in a contemptuous manner, as if Hodgett was to blame for his current situation.

"Indeed, I *am* the Witness," replied Hodgett. "Today I witnessed the final prophecy fulfilled. That means we haven't as much time to spend in Hunting Square tomorrow."

Cerok bristled, his fists clenched, and he looked poised to leap across the fire and strangle the smaller man. "You need not remind me that the deed must be done quickly. I will die for my King, but tomorrow is mine."

"You will die, but you'll also live on. That's why I'm here." Hodgett attempted a thin smile and offered Cerok the wineskin. "I would not think to take tomorrow away from you."

He took it and drank until it was empty. They sat in silence for several minutes until Cerok spoke. "I would not have you write that I am loath to perform my service, Witness. I am well aware of how my King honors me with his choice."

"Reluctance is understandable. You give much."

"What I give is nothing compared to what my King has given me."

"You'll be remembered fairly. That I promise. You'll receive your due glory."

Cerok closed his eyes and ran his fingers through his thinning hair. "Fair is good. I don't ask for glory."

"You'll receive a fair share of it whether you want it or not. They'll place your name alongside the other Daggerbearers. What would you have them call you?"

"I don't care. Why should it matter?"

"Well it may not matter to you, but it matters to a great number of other people. The Daggerbearers are legendary, you know that. You'll become a legend too."

"I'm here for my King. I told you. I don't care for the glory. Given my choice, I'd return to my farm tomorrow and never leave."

"Very good, so you would have them call you Cerok the Farmer. I will make a note of it in my book."

Cerok looked disgusted. "You will not. That's a terrible title."

"Ahh, so you *do* care a bit for glory."

"I do not, but Cerok the Farmer will not honor those before. Something more serious is in order, I think. You won't make a mockery of this service."

"I have no intention of mocking anything. I was merely trying to lighten the mood."

"Then you obviously don't understand the true gravity of this undertaking."

It was Hodgett's turn to take offense. "I understand perfectly. Offered. I just grow weary of you reminding me." He lay back against the frozen ground and wrapped his blankets tight

around his bony frame. Sleep came to him quickly and Cerok spoke no more

The morning dawned colder than the day before and the smothering blanket of clouds tugged at the treetops as their path led them to higher elevations. Hodgett thanked Suz as he did each morning that the screaming wind and snowfall had not left them forever buried beneath a mountain of powder. Cerok had erected their portable shelter the night before, probably saving their lives. It was a simple structure of leather and wood, but it provided some relief. Hodgett felt somewhat foolish for going to sleep without it, but it was Cerok's responsibility to make sure this quest was successful. Hodgett was simply there to chronicle it.

They broke camp in silence. As usual, Cerok had refused breakfast, leaving Hodgett to eat alone. He finished off the last of their provisions save for a tiny heel of bread that he stored in his pouch for lunch. By nightfall they would reach Hunting Square and he intended to eat well. He was unaccustomed to rough living and a quick sniff told him that a bath would be in order as well.

They walked all that day through the green depths of Barrett's Forest. Its namesake was Barrett the Axe, a great bear of a man and one of the earliest Daggerbearers. He was of an age so long past that he truly was the stuff of myth. It was said that Barrett was the finest woodsman to ever fell a tree and that no wood was safe from his blade. But when he was chosen to be the King's Offered, he walked the same path as all of the Daggerbearers and upon reaching the ancient wood, he was struck by its beauty and dropped his axe to the earth, vowing never to use it again. Hodgett doubted that the story was true. Such tales had a habit of growing larger each time they jumped from tongue to ear. Still, he could not discount the natural beauty of the tall, slender aspens and the shorter wedgewood trees with their jagged leaves of brown and gold. Somehow these trees were winning the battle with the elements, their whipping branches keeping a greedy hold on their foliage. Hodgett was thankful that as the forest became thicker, it provided additional shelter from the gale.

By noon, Hodgett was no longer able to spot the tops of the trees. The clouds were nearly low enough to touch and he wondered how close they were to the mountain town. He slung his pack from his shoulder and reached in for the bread. He downed it in three bites and offered none to Cerok. If he refused to eat, then it was none of Hodgett's concern.

"We don't have far to go now," said Cerok. It was not until he spoke that Hodgett noticed how silent it was. The winds had settled to a light breeze and the rustling of the trees had become a whisper. Hodgett was used to the city and the stillness unnerved him.

"These are the woods where Jason the Hunter stalked his prey," said Cerok as he slowed down to walk beside Hodgett. "A statue of him stands in Hunting Square and every boy longs to be such a man.

"Well, I'd say you've come the closest."

Cerok began to laugh.

The sound was strange to Hodgett. He had never known the man to smile for more than an instant, let alone laugh. But here he was, the enormity of his task bending his back with each step and he was able to cast it all aside. Hodgett knew the man was home. His family, his life, they were all in this place, and for a moment it gave him joy.

"Indeed, Witness, I am the closest. To think all the times as a child I acted out Jason's adventures and now I'm living one. The road that took me from then to now is a path I could not have predicted."

Ringing the trees like a warning the battle of the elements, their whipping branches keeping a greedy hold on their foliage.

"That's a pity. If you could have, perhaps we would have packed warmer clothes."

Cerok began laughing again and Hodgett smiled in spite of himself. Cerok was difficult to get along with at times, but Hodgett could not guess how he would behave if faced with the same challenge. They continued on toward the place of Cerok's birth and toward the lake that was their ultimate destination. The sun was still blocked from view, but for a time there was a bit more light in the forest.

As they topped a particularly steep rise and peered down into the valley, Hodgett caught his first glimpse of Hunting Square. It was a comfortable looking village filled with single-story structures, their slanted roofs heavy with snow. As the name implied, there was a square in the center of town, and in it Hodgett spied the statue of Jason, his great bow drawn and ready.

Darkness was falling and a haggard farmer was coaxing two skinny cows back into his barn. A bale of hay lay half eaten in the snow and the animals seemed reluctant to leave it. Giving up, the man grabbed the hay and carried it into the barn, the hungry cows at his heels.

On the far side of town, the Rain River snaked past, its creeping current glistening white. The water wasn't entirely frozen yet, but small islands of ice made their way southward to Tylin's Lake. Hodgett judged that a man could still navigate a small boat through the ice and longed to leave today and not tomorrow. The longer they waited, the more difficult it would be. All three prophecies had come to pass and that meant that, the hardest of the weather was imminent. If the river froze entirely, they would be forced to walk and the King would surely die before they reached the lake.

As they strode into the village, the few citizens who still remained on the streets stared at them suspiciously. The ones who recognized Cerok began to whisper and word of the travelers' arrival moved through the town faster than their feet carried them. Hodgett's presence revealed Cerok's fate. He wore the pale gray robes of a Witness and could only be accompanying the Offered. Many of the folk who recognized Cerok came and greeted him with kind words and handshakes. An old butcher still ripe with the stench of his work scrambled over and grabbed Cerok by the arm.

"Cerok, lad," said the man. "You've been chosen."

"Yes, Jak. I bear the Dagger."

"Lord, to think it! No man from Hunting Square has been chosen since Jason! I seen the last one pass through, Eric his name was, nearly forty years ago. I was just a boy."

"That would be Eric the Brick," said Hodgett.

"Eric the Brick. That's right," said the man. "They say he beat the Tunon to death with his bare hands. What do you plan to do, Cerok?"

"Kill the Tunon once again and then die, I suppose."

"Would you have me live only to watch everything around me be swept away?"

"Oh, you'll die of course. But you'll live on!"

"So they tell me," said Cerok dryly. He was obviously becoming weary of the conversation, but the man didn't seem to notice. His shoulders began to slouch again as if the weight of the responsibility that returned to him was a tangible thing.

"They say the Tunon has seven arms and teeth like a troll. Fourteen feet tall, he's."

Hodgett snorted. "Seen a troll lately, have you? How big are their teeth?"

The man regarded Hodgett with a sour look. His hands fumbled absently with his bloody apron and he stammered when he spoke. "That's just what they say is all. I never seen a Tunon nor a troll."

"Funny, only a Witness can claim to have *truly* seen the Tunon," said Hodgett, "and it's common knowledge they can't speak of its appearance lest they anger Suz. I wonder how so many claim to know his description in detail, down to the last yellowed troll's tooth."

The butcher was temporarily struck silent by the comment and Hodgett was pleased to see a half-hidden smirk creep across Cerok's face. His pleasure was short lived.

"How are you going to tell Madeline," asked the butcher, "and the boy?" He was several paces behind them now, and when Cerok turned, the expression that appeared on his face sent the man scrambling back into his shop; the thin plank door slamming behind him in a cloud of snow.

"Friendly folk," said Hodgett. Cerok didn't comment.

Hodgett was disappointed that they didn't have to pass through the square to get to Cerok's house. The larger than life-size statue of Jason and his bow intrigued him, but they passed several streets to the north and he only caught a glimpse between the buildings. He decided that he would visit the site on his way back when he had more time. Assuming, of course, that Cerok beat the Tunon.

Finally, they reached the far end of town and a long, low house came into view. It sat alongside the river and Hodgett could hear the welcome sound of flowing water and the steady creak of wood as it turned the wheel of a mill. Unlike many of the houses in Hunting Square, it was not constructed of forest timber but of large river rocks, dark and polished. The setting sun touched their surfaces, turning them from black to white to brilliant blue.

A jovial little boy with hair so blond it was almost white was chasing a large hog around the side of the house with a tiny stick. The hog snorted and scrambled, looking for an escape but his resistance only made the boy more excited. "Hog, hog!" he yelled and they disappeared around the house once more.

The front door swung open and a woman stepped out of the house. She was slender with thin, hard eyes. Her sandy brown dress was functional but not fine and it was almost identical to the color of her hair. She carried a large water bucket on her left arm, but upon seeing the two men staring at her, it fell to the ground forgotten. She watched them approach for a time before closing her eyes to cry.

"Madeline," said Cerok as he took her in his arms. She made a show of resistance then buried her face in his chest. "Let's go inside and we'll talk."

She raised her eyes to meet his and Hodgett could see they were filled with weariness and pain. "We haven't much to talk about. If he's with you, your decision is made."

"Madeline, it wasn't my decision."

"All those men called to attend and they could find none better than you. He couldn't choose a man without a family?" She was shaking now and Hodgett couldn't tell if it was from her anger or the rapidly falling temperature.

"The King chose and Maleth agreed. This is the will of Suz."

"Maleth be damned! Her prophecies don't always come true. She spoke of a record harvest for the lowlands last fall, but it turned into the worst season for sand locusts in a generation. I think you could find a great many farmers who scoff at what she says. She's only a prophet, not Suz himself."

"The three events she chose for the Offered have already come to pass. The King's Snow worsens every day and soon he will die. Would you have me live only to watch everything around me be swept away?"

Madeline looked stricken. She dropped her gaze and directed it at Hodgett who was standing several paces behind Cerok, trying to look unobtrusive. Her silence soon became unbearable. "My name is Hodgett, my lady," he said softly. "I am the Witness. I'm sorry we meet under such circumstances." His comments sounded trite to his own ears and he wished he had just kept quiet.

Tears began to form in her eyes again and without a word she spun around and stumbled back into the house. Cerok didn't follow, he simply leaned against the sparkling stones of the house and stared at the ground. Not knowing what else to do, Hodgett took the discarded bucket and carried it down to the river to get some water.

As he rounded the side of the house, he was nearly trampled by the stampeding hog. He fell away as the frightened animal raced past, the boy still firmly engaged in the pursuit. Hodgett heard Cerok call to the boy. "Will, come here son." Will realized that his father was home and ran toward him, the hog momentarily forgotten. The poor animal saw his chance and ran back toward the river, nearly knocking Hodgett over again in the process.

Hodgett could hear them laughing and talking as he filled the bucket. Cerok spoke in the slow, smiling tone reserved for conversations with the very young and Will chattered loudly in one and two word sentences. Hodgett smiled as he wondered how that tiny boy had managed to frighten the lumbering hog that was at least twice his size. Like most boys, he appeared to have no fear.

When he returned with the water, the pair had disappeared into the house and Hodgett knocked sharply before entering. He was greeted with the welcomed smell of beef stew, bubbling in a small iron pot. He hadn't realized that he was hungry, but the promise of fresh meat and vegetables after a week of trail rations elicited a low rumble from his stomach.

The house was warm and inviting and served as a sharp contrast to the demeanor of his hosts. Cerok took Hodgett's frozen cloak from him and hung it near the fireplace to dry. He then sat down at a round wooden table and took Will upon his knee. Madeline busied herself with the task of cutting squash and

radishes into small pieces and adding them to the pot She didn't acknowledge Hodgett as he placed the full bucket of river water at her feet and he decided to take a place at the table himself

No one spoke for several minutes except for Will, who exercised his obviously new found ability to do so with an unending barrage of talk. "Hog, ma! Hog! Run." He beat his hands happily on the tabletop and laughed at his own antics Hodgett took a copper coin from his pocket and gave it a toss. It spun in wide delicate circles on the table and the boy became hypnotized with wonder. He sat watching it quietly until it came to a stop. Hodgett gave him a wink, snatched the coin up, and sent it spinning again This time the boy started clapping and grabbed the coin before it finished

The meal tasted wonderful, but Hodgett had a difficult time enjoying it. Cerok sat staring at Madeline, as if willing her to speak, but her gaze stayed fixed in the direction of her dinner bowl Neither of them appeared to have an appetite, and soon the dishes were cleared, their contents untouched

That night, Hodgett slept under a musty green quilt covered with images of bears, wolves, and other forest animals The warmth of the fireplace provided a soothing environment for rest, but he still managed only a few hours of sleep The voices of Cerok and Madeline drifted in from their adjacent bedroom, hushed at first, then sharp and loud. Hodgett couldn't make out what they were saying but he didn't need to

When he awoke the next morning, Cerok was shaking his arm He was evidently ready to leave The sun had not yet risen and it took a few minutes for Hodgett to clear the dreams from his head and get to his feet.

"We're going now?" asked Hodgett, his head still heavy

"Now." Cerok's face looked drawn and skeletal reflected in the dying embers

Hodgett searched for a second in the dark before finding his pack. Hefting it to his shoulder, he turned and followed Cerok toward the door He paused to kiss Will's sleeping forehead and the boy stirred

"Hog," he whispered, and Hodgett noticed he was still clutching the copper coin in his tiny hand. With visible effort, Cerok pulled himself away and walked through the door into the King's Snow Hodgett followed him into the dark and Madeline did not come to see them off

Hours later, their tiny boat was winding a slow path down the nearly frozen river. Cerok swept away heavy chunks of floating ice with his oar and in some cases was forced to stop and hammer at the water's surface to break it loose Their passage was uncomfortable and tedious and Hodgett decided that the bitter cold weather of late paled in comparison to the unnaturally cold temperatures they were encountering as they traveled south. He was forced to blink his eyes periodically to keep them from freezing shut. When the gusts of wind slowed to a dull roar, he was certain that he could hear the water crackling as it froze

They went on that way for several hours, Cerok fighting the river and Hodgett shivering beneath his cloak, waiting for his death from cold Finally, the boat stopped and Cerok announced that they would not be able to travel farther by river Hodgett lifted his head and saw the entire expanse of water before them was a sheet of ice

"So we won't make it in time," said Hodgett It was not a question

"We'll make it, Witness The lake isn't far, maybe a league by foot." He stood up in the boat and made one tenuous step out and onto the surface of the ice Judging it stable enough, he left the boat and crossed softly to the shore, leaving Hodgett nothing to do but follow

He was amazed that the temperature was low enough that newly frozen ice would support his weight, but he managed to make it to the shore with little difficulty Cerok dug in his pack and produced a heavier cloak than the one he was wearing The cloak was white, fitting for a death in the snow Hodgett thought, but Cerok seemed somewhat revitalized and they began their slow tromp through the shin-deep snow

Cerok had taken a heavy sword from his home to replace the broken one and it hung low in its scabbard, slicing a trail in the powder Hodgett hoped that it would suffice against whatever the Tunon was, but he wasn't very confident At least, he thought, this will all end soon. Cerok will be victorious and the sun will return or he will lose and something else will happen It would not be something good, he was certain, but he doubted anything could be worse than this cold that threatened to freeze his bones

Hodgett had no idea how far or how long they walked. He kept his eyes focused on Cerok's wide back and followed mindlessly, trusting the man to know the way The trust was well founded With a heavy sigh, Cerok stopped walking and dropped his pack to the ground Hodgett nearly ran into him before realizing he had stopped. He stepped to Cerok's side and beheld Tylin's Lake.

The river met the lake at the mouth of a great cavern, its limestone walls climbing hundreds of feet into the air. Hodgett was awestruck as they passed into the cavern and walked upon the lake There was no shore and no other way in unless there was another entrance elsewhere in the cavern Both cavern and lake seemed to go on forever to the south and were wider than the village of Hunting Square. Wisps of snow whipped at their ankles as they made their way toward the center of the lake

"Where will you call him?" asked Hodgett, adrenaline providing a temporary reprieve from the cold.

"I suppose here is as good a place as any," said Cerok "Maleth said the protocol is uncertain." He glanced around again as if second-guessing himself and then slid his blade silently from its scabbard His cloak shifted and Hodgett noticed the King's Dagger still sheathed at his side

Hodgett felt he should say something to the Offered before he summoned his foe, but found no words that fit the situation He stood quietly, fumbling with his fingers and awaiting the inevitable

Cerok's blade was not a finesse weapon, but a long, flat slab of steel well suited for a heavy handed brawler Hodgett prayed that the Tunon would not defeat Cerok because he doubted he'd even be able to lift the sword, let alone fight with it. Cerok lowered it to his side with no obvious effort and then turned to face the Witness one last time

"I would give you my thanks, Hodgett." He met Hodgett's eyes and for the first time called him by name "You have been a better companion than most."

"I thank you, Cerok"

"I know you may not speak of what will transpire here, but it would mean much if you could speak to my son When he's older."

"And your wife"

"Truthfully, I lost Madeline long before yesterday. I do this thing for my King and for my son He will only remember me through others' words I would not have him remember me as history will, as a Daggerbearer. I would have him remember me as a father."

"I will do this You have my word."

"Then let's begin." With that, Cerok turned away and presented his sword in challenge In a slow, precise manner, he recited the words "Here stand I, Cerok, King Remmon's Man

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The TAO of FLYNN

BY ERIC M. WITCHEY ILLUSTRATION BY ANDY B. CLARKSON

Flynn was an honest liar. He would look you dead in the eye, smile his commercial, outdoorsman smile, wink one pale blue eye, and say, "I'm a professional liar." And that was the truth. He'd keep telling you the truth until your wallet was empty, then he'd smile again, say, "I warned you," and walk away.

All you could do was smile and watch him go because you'd been warned, and damn if he didn't nail you anyway.

"Keep an eye on Flynn," Cooper had said. "He's good, but he's going to get us in trouble."

Cooper was the boss. Back then I was his man to beat, and the whiteboard in the coffee room showed it. If Cooper had a hot lead, I was the man he sent.

Once I was in the door, my closing ratio was 5 to 1. If I made five calls, I came back with paper on one. Everybody needed more fire insurance.

Once, on a good streak, I did six calls and managed to come home with paper on eight. The last call had forgotten I was coming. I hit triple as the entertainment at their dinner party.

That was before Flynn. After Flynn, everything was different.

I was in the coffee room throwing darts the day Flynn came in. He wore a three-piece suit and patent leather, wingtip shoes. Italian, no less. Remember those commercials for cigarettes? The ones with the swallows? He looked like that. Right down to the dimple in his tanned chin. Dark brown hair, kind of wavy and pale blue eyes and I'm talking pale blue eyes.

Flynn had a way with women. He had a way with a deck of cigarettes, a table of players, and a set of dice. He was a ladies' man, no doubt about it.

But once he got the brick-and-mortal side of things, he was all business. Honest. I can't remember how many times I saw him remove a client's car keys and say, "Mr. Jones, I'm sorry, but you've had too much to drink. I can't let you get behind the wheel of your car." It was impossible to keep up with him. I'm not even sure he ever listened. It was like he already knew what you were going to say, and he didn't even care. You had to listen to him to catch the nuance of vibration in the air coming from his mouth.

Mostly, luck depends on seeing what's right in front of you. But sometimes it seems like there's a little more to it—

I stood there in my two-piece, denim suit and my cowboy boots One second, I was sure I was the best in the game The next, I knew I hadn't even seen the rule book. He was that good

So, Cooper called me in after three days went by and Flynn had gone out and come back with paper two, three times every day

Cooper's shaved-bald head is low He's nose close to a pale green spreadsheet laid out over his desk. I see the white cotton shirt over the round of his back Embarrassed for him, I scan the wall shelves full of corporate cheerleader sales and motivation books behind him.

"Richard," he says—and I really perk up because nobody but my grandmother calls me Richard. He sits up and squints toward me. I'm thinking the guy should get over himself and get some glasses "I don't think Flynn's on the program," he says. "I think he's cutting corners

The program was the patter, our pitch, the script we had to use when we talked to a client It was a sacred thing handed down to us by arcane sales and marketing people who knew both the mind of God and man. We spoke the words, and in them was the magic of fear and the promise of security.

Change the incantations, and we opened the door to litigation Lawyers would descend on us all

Deliver us from evil and lead us not into temptation, Amen

I wait for him to tell me why it makes a difference to me. He gets down with his paper again. "We need totals," he says to his desk. He looks up. "We can ride this to the top," he says

I see a book behind him. The title on the spine is *Ride to the Top.*

He stands up and smoothes his hands over his head like he still has the hair he shaved off himself He sucks in one of his speech-making breaths and launches. "You'd like a sales office of your own someday, wouldn't you, Rich? Maybe in Oregon? I know I'd like the freedom that comes to a man like me when my men are successful You'd like to help me with that, wouldn't you?"

I know my lines I understand his wind. I nod

"Flynn's a loose cannon "

"He's smooth "

"Smooth ain't shit in court. Run with him today. Watch him. Let me know if he's on the program."

It wasn t a request

An hour later, I'm ready to ride shotgun on the first run of the day. I've got my case, my silver Cross pen, my high producer lapel pin with two little diamond chips in it for being high man a couple months straight My mojo is on line and steaming.

Flynn's a no show. Four hours, he's late. I could have run a program and come back for a new lead.

Does he apologize when he comes in?

"Rich," he says. "Game of darts?"

"Four hours, Flynn You're late I'm supposed to ride shotgun with you today "

He took off his jacket, pulled a chain and bar thing out of the pocket, twisted it into a hanger, and hung his coat on the door handle of the bathroom.

"I lost an appointment waiting for you," I say

"You can have my sale today," he says

Mentally, I gave him credit for trying. "You only have time for two more calls "

"I'll keep one I'll give one to you." He picks up the darts. Not the three on the dart board. He went to the coffee can full of irregular, dull tips, bent fins, and busted stems All the darts. Then he waltzed back to the line and unbuttoned all but one of the buttons on his vest.

"Shoot with me, Rich. I know you like the game."

My bag was down and my coat was off and I was standing beside him ready to play, and the whole time I was taking off that coat, putting down that case, and crossing the room, I was explaining to him how I couldn't play because I needed to get to work.

"I won t keep you long," he said. "We'll go out in an hour or so."

I relaxed, not because I wanted to, but because he said it was OK "An hour from now will be halfway through the appointment. The client will be so pissed, they won't even let us in."

"Closest to bull goes first?"

I nodded

He handed me a dart

I'd like to say he cheated. I'd like to say he gave me some nasty, crooked, broken twisted, wobbly dart. He didn't work that way He gave me the best dart in the can. It was my favorite dart from my favorite set of three. Sharp, yeah. I was the one that kept it that way Straight as a Mormon prayer boy, and the flights were brand new. Each fin had a bull's-eye on it, and one fin on each dart had the scoring combinations for Cricket printed on it

I knew he could have screwed me He had all the darts

"Thanks," I said.

"Pleasure," he said Then he pulled a dart for himself. It sucked The tip was bent into a bead. The flights were creased. One was torn. I'd thrown that dart, and I knew how it spiraled in the air.

Did I warn him? No. Play to win or don't play That was one motto of the office

"Go ahead," he said.

I toed the line with my right foot, left foot at ninety degrees. I lined up my shoulders and cocked my arm. I set both my eyes on the bull. Stereoscopic vision is a key in darts I breathed my ritual. One breath to settle Two breaths for focus. Three breaths to feel the dart

Phht!

In the 20 wedge just outside the bull's green ring. Good, but not great. I nodded my approval

That's when he said it to me the first time "Rich, there's all kinds of magic in the world." He doesn't even step up to the line, "Some kinds of magic come from rituals." He looks at me and tosses his dart. Like always, it wobbles and twists and rises a bit and falls.

Dead-center bull

"Shit "

He laughed. "Some kinds come from doing the right thing in the moment. I throw first," he said, and he handed me my ass in that game

Later, when I was practicing and he was talking, he said, "Throw all the darts, Rich. Don't just throw the straight ones or the pretty ones or the flat ones. Throw the ones that wobble and spin and break up or to the right When you can throw the whole can of darts and get every one inside the doubles ring, I'll show you a trick "

"Thanks," I said

It took me two hours, but I finally did it Twenty-two darts inside the doubles circle "Shit hot!" I laughed and clapped and grinned at Flynn

He nodded and put down his magazine

Cooper came in about then. He didn't say anything. He glared at Flynn, then he shook his head in disappointment at me.

"Time to go," Flynn said.

Cooper withdrew, but I knew him well enough to know that his red neck was a sign of how pissed he was

Flynn put on his coat, and I tried to figure out how come I'd let Flynn con me into a game of darts when we were supposed to be running appointments

Cooper thinks I need someone to watch me?" Flynn asked

"No, he just wants me to learn from you," I said. "I'm supposed to observe your technique Cooper says you're smooth

Flynn slipped his black Lincoln Towne car up to the curb in front of a low, quad apartment building: two daylight basement units and two half step walkups.

Bad prospects The phone girls hadn't done their prequalifying.

Flynn leaned toward me a little. He smiled. "Rich, you re not a liar You've never really been a liar "

"You're a man who tells the truth?" I said

"I'm a professional liar," he said. "You're an Iowa bale bucker who jumped ship and ran for the bright lights. You have an honest face, and I can see the truth in your puffy cheeks and your big brown eyes "

My face must have turned six shades of red. I was mad. I was upset. I felt naked, and I wanted something that would get this guy

out of my life or under control. Nothing felt right since he'd come into the office. "Cooper says you're off the program."

Cooper knows his business. I know mine," Flynn said.

"You're in the same business."

First thing you need to know about lying, Rich, is that nobody is in the *same* business. Until you figure out what business somebody is in, you can't find their truth. Until you find their truth, you can't nudge it.

All of a sudden, you're teaching *me* to sell?" I was really getting hot. I was giving up sales calls to get this guy in line, and he was telling my how to do my job. "Remember who the top producer is, Flynn. You haven't been here long enough to lecture me."

He got out of the car.

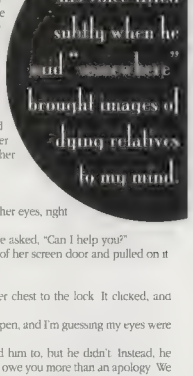
"This house doesn't prequalify," I said. "We're wasting our time."

He opened the back of the car and got his jacket. He brushed it off with the lint brush he kept in the glove compartment. "We don't need to sell anything for you to see if I'm on the program, do we?"

I got out of the car and followed him to the house. The address we wanted was one of the lower level apartments. We had renter's policies, but they didn't pay for squat, and nobody bothered to write them. Getting renters to bump up to protect the meager possessions they could cram into 600 to 800 square feet was about as likely as pulling diamonds out of a north wind.

Flynn knocked on the door. To me he said, "Pay attention, Rich. I'm going to show you the program."

The door opened. We were almost two hours late. The woman who answered was in a diamond-quilt, floral pastel, flannel bathrobe. She was maybe thirty-five, it was hard to tell with her short, dark hair in spiny curlers. She actually wore pink, fuzzy bunny slippers, and when she looked at Flynn, her face turned the same color as her bunnies.



She literally gasped.

She stammered.

He waited, smiling, staring at her eyes, right into her eyes.

Finally, hand on her chest, she asked, "Can I help you?"

Flynn reached for the handle of her screen door and pulled on it. He didn't take his eyes off hers.

The door was locked.

She moved her hand from her chest to the lock. It clicked, and Flynn opened the door.

Her mouth was still hanging open, and I'm guessing my eyes were pretty wide.

Flynn didn't go in. I expected him to, but he didn't. Instead, he said, "Ma'am, my associate and I owe you more than an apology. We are very sorry for being late for our appointment."

"Appointment," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. We are from Three County Safety and Insurance, and we were supposed to be here two hours ago to help protect your home from a fire."

"A fire."

"Yes, ma'am. I know we're late. May I come in and explain?"

She stepped back.

Flynn stepped into her home. I followed.

The fuzzy bunny lady seemed to come to her senses. She stepped out onto the stoop, looked around, then came back in and closed the door. "Can I have just a minute?" she asked.

"We'll, ma'am," he said. "We really can't stay. We just came by to apologize for missing our appointment."

I didn't know what he was doing, but he sure as hell was not on the program. He was supposed to be complimenting some object in her house at this point, striking up a little conversation, getting to know her income and job status.

"I'm sure you've been busy," she said. "I can change clothes and be out in just a second."

"No need, ma'am," he said.

"Please," she said, and she grinned a wall-to wall and split the lips grin. "Call me Linda."

"Linda, would you call me Flynn?" He took her hand.

I thought she was going to faint.

He covered her hand with his other hand. "I'm so sorry about this. We've had—" He stopped. She leaned toward him. "—a little difficulty with someone at our office."

"Oh, I hope everyone is OK."

"Everyone is fine, Linda." He led her to her sofa and sat her down. He sat next to her.

"Rich," he said, still holding Linda's hand.

I was still at the door. My alarms were all going off. This was sooo not the program. The apartment couldn't have been more than 400 square feet. Smaller than it looked from the outside. It was full of books, mostly paperback, mysteries and romances and some thrillers. I recognized some of the big block-lettered names on the covers. Hey, I've seen them in the grocery like everyone else.

"Huh?" I said.

"Would you fill out a," he paused and scanned the apartment. He seemed to fix those deep well eyes on something on her mantle.

I looked.

She looked.

"That's a beautiful photograph of you," he said.

I see the picture. Young woman in a blouse and business skirt. Long dark hair, a lot like my favorite phone girl, Caroline. Good figure. Not model material, but nice, like back in Iowa. The kind of girl that wouldn't touch me with a pole. Just like Caroline.

Linda put a hand over her pale-lipped mouth and giggled like a schoolgirl. "That's my niece."

"Looks just like you," he said.

I thought he was nuts. I looked again. Damned if it didn't look just like Linda. Not the curlers and nightgown part, but the face—flat cheeks filling in under prominent cheekbones accenting almost Asian eyes. Mighty strange looking on the woman with curlers. Pretty as hell on the lady in the photo.

"Oh, thank you, Flynn. My sister says she got my eyes."

Flynn looks at me. "A five-and-fifty, Rich."

"This place—"

He interrupts me. "Five-and-fifty, Rich. We don't have time. We have to get going."

I nodded and opened my case to pull out the papers. Just like playing darts, I know this is nuts, that I'm going to be in deep shit with Cooper, that if I don't get Flynn on the program or at least get him out of the apartment, I'm likely to start getting shit appointments from Caroline, and I can't afford that.

Still, I kneel down on the nasty carpet on the other side of her wrought iron and glass coffee table, and I start filling out the paper for five years' worth of $50 000 flood and fire coverage on her photos and paperbacks.

"Linda," he says.

I look up.

"Keep working, Rich." I go back to work.

"I can see that you value family and culture by that picture of your niece and the books that you read."

She's staring deep into his eyes. Her head is a little to one side, like a canary looking at a mirror in its cage.

"My associate is filling out an insurance policy so that if you ever have a fire, if a water main were ever to break nearby, if your toilets back up, or if lightning were to strike this building and overload your television—What?" he says.

She jumps.

Hell, I jumped. He didn't really say it loud. He said it well, *dif-*

ferent I swear I checked the TV to see if it was OK So did Linda

Well," he says, "then you'll be able to get back all your precious things.

He's nodding

She's nodding

I'm writing paper and nodding

My associate has a paper for you to sign, Linda '

I hand over the five-and-fifty

She stops nodding

He says, "Linda, I'm going to go ahead and have you sign this and write us a check for the amount written here Now, normally, I'd sit here and share some valuable information with you about my company and fires and the value of your property, and most of all about how valuable you are to me and to your family "

She's nodding again

"But my associate and I have had an—" Again, he stops "I'm sorry we were late," he says That voice of his is quiet Linda's mouth is a little open She blinks and licks her lower lip "We have to be *somewhere* in a few minutes," Flynn says

The way his voice lifted subtly when he said "somewhere" brought images of dying relatives to my mind. I thought poor Linda was going to start crying. I don't know what images were running through her head about our situation, but I know they were full of flames, blood, and ambulances

Is there anything I can do?" she asks

His smile comes on, and she sits up straight in her flannel robe and fuzzy bunny slippers "Linda, after my associate and I have taken care of a few things, I'll come back later and explain these things to you more completely "

The woman's face turned red and she looked at the floor and bit her lower lip

"If you don't agree," he says, "that this is important and worth the check you're going to write now, I'll tear this paper up Is that fair enough?"

"Thank you," she says, and she signs and writes a check for the whole policy instead of the first premium

Fifteen minutes from knock to return to the Lincoln, and Flynn has his jacket hung on that hanger thing of his from the clothing hook in the back seat

We're rolling along, and I'm pretty well screwed. How the hell do I explain that to Cooper? He'll gut us both

"Want to play some golf?" Flynn asks

I look at him, thinking he's joking Cooper is already pissed at us We just violated a dozen rules. I'm on the hook for my job, and Caroline is gonna take one look at my day totals and start treating me like a two-day-old trout a dog left on her doorstep

He's not joking. He's looking at a country club sign up ahead

"You're kidding," I say "Where? We don't have time "

"Right there," he says, and he turns the Lincoln into the country club's lane

"We can't golf here We're not members "

He's already pulling up to the locked gate and the little guard house His window rolls down, and he leans out to chat with the guard I can feel his voice rising and falling, but I can't make out the words

I don't know why I didn't expect it, but the gate went up and we rolled right on in to the exclusive parking garage beneath the brick Colonial Hotel and club house for the Green Hills Estate Social Club

Flynn and I got out and a guy in a red vest took the Lincoln Flynn makes me take my denim jacket off, then he goes to the trunk and pulls out a wheeled, folding caddy thing and red and tan leather bag full of clubs

"Flynn?

He looks at me. "You're a little pale, Rich "

"Flynn, we shouldn't be here."

"Relax, Rich We'll play a round and leave."

Now, I'm a farm boy, mind you. I've never played golf, and I've sure as hell never been to a place like the G.H.E.S.C Yeah, I was shaking

"You told Linda we had to be someplace '

If we weren't supposed to be here, we'd be someplace else," he said. Then he pulled a pair of black and white golf shoes out of the trunk. "See if these fit

They did, and he led me to the pro shop to rent some clubs

Clubs, balls, and cart were provided gratis for Flynn by the flustered woman at the counter I was on my way out the door when he put a hand on my shoulder

"We're going in there," he said. "I think we need another player "

I'm nervous enough about playing a game that is supposed to take a lifetime to master, and I didn't like the idea of another person watching me. Especially a person that might, just maybe, figure out that Flynn and me weren't members and were using "borrowed" stuff

He smiled He winked We went into the bar

Women stared

Men stared, then looked away, embarrassed for staring at a man

Flynn looked around the nineteenth hole. There was a brass rail and cherry-wood bar against the far wall so all the patrons at their linen-covered tables could look out and watch the putting green and first tee through a window that spread across the whole hundred feet of the side wall

"Before you met me, you thought you were a liar taking people's money. Have you ever seen me lie to anyone?"

The bar was the brightest bar I'd ever been in. It had custom, tight-plush carpet with a gold-diamond parquet pattern, each diamond surrounding a three-pointed crown, and each crown had a ruby in the center point

It was not long after one PM, and the place smelled like broiled steak and cigars.

Flynn headed for the end of the bar nearest the window There was a guy there, kinda oldish A thin, weathered, gray-haired man in a polo shirt, gray double-knit slacks, and white golf shoes

"Mind?" Flynn says

The guy turns. He's got a fat cigar going hot His bushy white eyebrows jump up, then come back down Thunderclouds start to grow behind gray eyes that I can just tell have seen a thousand guys like me die at the end of a pen

"You look like a man who knows this course," Flynn says "My friend and I are looking for another player to show us around. May we sit down?"

That does it. The thunderclouds dissipate The guy takes out his cigar and knocks the cherry off it into an ashtray He nods to a red-leather barstool next to him, then he reaches over the bar and pulls a silver tube up from a shelf He slips his cigar into that tube, and replaces it behind the bar.

Bad enough the guy reeks of "I eat fucking salesmen," he's part of the program at the G.H.E.S.C

"I know the course," the guy says.

"First hole looks like a pretty tight dog-leg," Flynn says. "Set up on the left of the tee and hit a high shot, say 150 yards to make the trees and hit the lie on the other side?"

"I've seen it done that way," the guy says. "Name's Anderson. Gill to you "

They shake. Gill hails the bartender, who calls him Mr Anderson and says nothing about money or checks. Drinks arrive, and I can see there are other people waiting for service. I keep my mouth shut

"How do you play it, Gill?"

"I cheat," he says "I designed this course There's a low drive right through the trees If you've got the control and the balls for it, you can make the green in one "

Flynn laughs

People are staring at us

Two drinks and half an hour later, I'm standing on the tee with Gill and Flynn. Didn't matter that there were no tee times available for a week. Didn't matter that we weren't members. Flynn told Gill that. Didn't matter that we hadn't paid for my equipment—Flynn told him that too. In fact, the more Flynn told him, the more Gill thought Flynn was a hell of a guy, and if I was with Flynn, well by God, have another drink.

So, Gill sets his ball on a tee, and sure as shit he drives it right through the woods and makes the green.

Flynn shakes his head and smiles. He says, "I'm not even going to give that a shot, Gill." So, Flynn puts his ball down, steps up, and says, "What's the bet, Gill?"

"Hundred dollars a hole?"

Flynn nods and swings.

The ball knew where it was going. Up and off the tee, rising and sliding toward the tree line on the right, and I swear it was gonna hit the trees, and it pulled up and rolled over in a hook across the tops of the trees and kept turning and I figure we lost that one and then it goes down, I figure right in the forest, but Gill says, "Flynn, that was the finest tee shot I've ever seen on this hole. It's a pleasure." And they both look at me.

My ball does not know where it's going. That, or it was born with gopher blood in it. I look up from my swing, and Gill is happily chatting with Flynn, and Flynn is listening and returning in kind, and they are both walking along toward my ball a few yards away.

Eight strokes and two balls later, we get to the green. Flynn is upslope twenty feet from the pin—that's what they call that flag they stick in the hole. Gill is downslope about twice as far. Flynn and Gill are both in, in one putt. They're real happy.

I'm in after five putts and a long gimme, which is what they call pity in golf.

Behind us, people are piling up for the reserved tee times they paid for.

Turns out, nobody plays through on Gill.

Turns out, nobody wants to once they talk to Flynn.

Turns out, we end up with a gallery, and they even clap for me when I get an extra yard or two off the tee.

Gill, the G.H.E.S.C. course designer, millionaire engineering company owner, world traveler, and general all-around good guy, gives Flynn his private cell number and asks him if he has time to go to Scotland next month.

I get a cigar, a new pair of golf shoes, and a set of clubs. Flynn and me head out.

In the car, I'm silent all the way back to Linda's house.

The Linda that meets us at the door is not the same Linda. She's got on a black silk dress, a strand of pearls, and black patent heels. Those slightly Asian eyes are made up to seem bigger, darker. Her curlers are now sable curls, and she has cleavage that makes me stare. The mousy haus-frau is suddenly a fucking babe.

At the door, she looks Flynn over head to toe. There is no doubt in my mind what she's looking for or at. She says, "I've been thinking about what you said about my things and my family. I don't trust the owner of this building, Flynn. The wiring, you know."

Flynn steps into her house, and she closes the door in my face.

I wait in the car.

Twenty minutes later, Flynn comes back with another 100K in policy upgrade and a personal check for five hundred bucks for taking a look at her wiring.

You know what I'm thinking at this point? I'm thinking, Jesus H. Chrysler on a half-sheil, what do I tell Cooper? Then I'm thinking, how does he do this stuff?

"That," Flynn says, "is *the* program."

"It wasn't Cooper's program."

"Cooper's program isn't Cooper's program."

"Huh?"

"Somebody made up Cooper's program, right?"

"I suppose somebody did, but then—"

"No buts about it. Cooper got his program from somebody else. My program is faster, easier, and leaves the client happier and me and you and Cooper richer. He got his paper. Linda got to feel pretty and safe. Gill got to show off his course and win a hell of a round of golf. You got a cigar, a new pair of shoes, and a lesson in life."

"But the program."

"Life is the program, Rich. Nobody can get off it. Not me. Not you. Not Cooper, Gill, or Linda. Nobody."

The rest of the ride to the office was silent except for Flynn's quiet humming.

When I handed Cooper the new paper, his smile was almost as excited as Linda's had been when she found Flynn at the door the second time. After a few minutes of flipping pages to make sure all the T's were crossed, he pinned me to my chair with a squint and grimace. "The program? Did he leave the program?"

I thought about the day for a couple seconds, then, in all honesty, I said, "No."

Caroline was in her cubicle behind the dispatch window. I leaned against the writing counter outside the window and looked down on the top of her head. She had her headset on, and she was talking to potential clients. Her desk lamp put a shine on her long, dark hair, and I swear if the window hadn't been in the way, I would have reached over and stroked her head just to feel the softness beneath those highlights.

After a few moments, she looked up. Her face lit up, then she hardened it. I was glad for the slip, but I played like I didn't see it.

"Got anything good for me this evening?" I said.

She punched the hang-up button on her phone. "Is that a joke?" she asked. She ripped an appointment sheet off her pad and slid it under the gap of the window.

I picked it up, then I glanced at the city map on the wall. "Good neighborhood," I said. "Close in. I'll be done by nine."

She tilted her head and flipped her hair over her shoulder to clear her mouthpiece. Her eyes smiled, but her mouth said, "So what?"

"So, maybe you'll let me buy you dinner?"

"I eat at seven."

"Just a drink, then."

"You didn't turn in any new paper today, Rich," she said.

"I was out with Flynn. Cooper sent me."

"You're on commission only, right?"

"Yeah."

"You should have said no."

"To Cooper? I don't think so."

"Write the paper tonight," she said. She dialed her next number. "We'll talk tomorrow." She started talking to someone on the phone, I wondered if I might get more time with her if I put my number on her list.

In the coffee room, Flynn was reading a magazine, some men's fashion thing. Fat Bob Barry was tossing darts. He wanted to beat me so bad, beat me at anything and everything. That guy just wanted my ass for no reason except spite and rocks to piss on.

"She shot you down?" Flynn said.

"Need a dick if you want that bitch," Bob said. He snorted once then tossed one of the best darts in the can and hit the wall.

I shot Flynn a look that was supposed to say, "Fuck you. Leave me alone." Apparently, that's not what he heard.

He got up and went to his jacket.

I'd had enough experience with him at that point that I knew if he picked up that jacket and slipped it on, we were going to do something I'd never done before. I didn't even ask. I just followed him to the Lincoln.

We ended up in Boise at Chesterman's Suits and Tuxedos. I had never been in an honest-to-God men's clothing store. It was strictly rack rank-and-file. In fact, at that point, I hadn't even considered that I might be able to buy a suit from Chesterman's.

Flynn opens the shop door for me. The place smelled like a dry cleaner's, except it wasn't hot and damp, and the old man that trotted up was wearing a five-hundred dollar suit that looked like it had

been sewn right onto him. He had one of those yellow tapes around his neck, and he had a clipboard on a strap slung over his shoulder. The grin that split his face made his half-glasses ride up his nose so he practically had to bow to look over the top of them.

Mr. Flynn, we're so glad to see you." He says. "Welcome back, Mr. Flynn. What can we do for you?

"Andrew," Flynn says.

"Thomas," the man corrects.

Flynn takes his hand just like he took the haus frau's. "I'm so sorry, Thomas," he says. "You took such good care of me when I was here. I was thinking about my friend here."

"Never mind, Mr. Flynn. You're a busy man. I'm sure you don't remember everyone you meet. My brother was here when you were here. His name is Allan. You were probably thinking of him."

"I want you to meet someone, Thomas," Flynn says. He puts a hand on Thomas's shoulder and one on mine. I swear, I could feel the other man right through Flynn's hand. For just a second, I thought I could taste bacon and cream cheese mixed with coffee. For a second, I thought I felt a sadness for a girl named Jenny that ran away from home.

Then Flynn stepped back, and the feeling was gone.

Thomas grinned at me. He looked over those glasses, shook my hand, and unslung his tape. "A friend of Mr. Flynn is always welcome in my store," he says.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr.—"

"Mr. Chesterton. Please call me Thomas."

I nodded.

"You have love," Thomas says. "She doesn't see you."

I looked at Flynn. He smiled and winked. God, I learned to get the heebee-jeebies when he winked. Then he goes over to a chair against the wall between two racks of suit coats. He takes off his jacket, hangs it on his little hanger on the rack, and settles in to the chair to watch.

Thomas walks around me. When he's back out in front of me, he nods. "I see the problem."

Flynn smiles and nods sagely.

"Problem?" I ask. I mean, OK, I was a rack man, and I have to admit all those expensive clothes made me nervous as hell, but that damn denim suit cost me almost a hundred bucks. Hell, I paid forty extra for the boots at Payless.

"You have the build for a split tail. Good shoulders," Thomas says. He goes behind me and measures my shoulders. "Very good shoulders," he says. "We can make her look at those."

"Problem?"

"Rich," Flynn says, "she shot you down. You want to change that, let Thomas do his magic. He's a good friend of mine, and he knows his clothes."

Thomas actually turned to Flynn and took a bow.

The front door opened. The service bell rang. Thomas's half-glasses dropped and his grin disappeared. He practically ran to the front door. "No. No. No." he says to the man halfway into the shop. "Not now. We're closed."

The man tried to push farther in. "Hours say—"

"Closed!" Thomas says. He pushed the man back. "Special order. Can't help you." He got the door closed, threw the deadbolt, and flipped over the orange plastic Closed. Open sign.

When he came back, he was smiling again.

Two hours later, I have to admit I did not look like the man that walked in. My suit was brown to set off my hair and eyes. The vest was silk with dark maroon and charcoal paisley patterns in it. "It'll draw her eye across your chest and down to the trouser line," Thomas said. I had on a shirt that felt like money in fabric. When I looked into the triptych mirror, I could actually see my reflection in the shine of my pointy-toed shoes. Thomas told me who made the shoes. It seemed to be important to him, and Flynn nodded in homage when Thomas said the name. I figured those shoes were going to run more than forty bucks.

"I can't afford this, Thomas." I must have said that twenty times while Thomas was trying colors, sizes, cuts. I said it again when he started doing the alterations right there while we watched. Every time, he looked at Flynn and they smiled at each other.

Flynn was putting on his jacket, and I knew I was in way over my head. Dressed, buffed, and handed one of those little hangers, Flynn had, I had to face up to the fact that I had to pay for this suit.

"Thomas, what do I owe you for this?"

He strung his tape over his neck again. He lifted his clipboard and peered through his glasses. Finally, he looks up at me. That damn Flynn-induced smile started spreading across his face.

When his glasses were way up and he was looking over their tops, he said, "Rich, I can tell you that you simply can't afford these clothes."

"What?"

"I'm going to make you the same deal I make Mr. Flynn."

"How much is it?"

"I'll give you a few of my cards, and if someone asks you about this suit, you give them one of my cards."

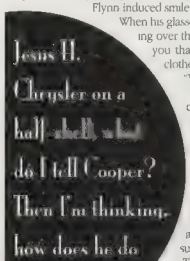
"But—"

Flynn stepped up and took Thomas's cards. "Thomas, you are an amazing man. I'll make sure he does it."

There was hand-shaking and nodding and smiling all around, and I kept stealing a look at myself in the mirror. I actually looked like one of the men in the magazine back at the office.

Rich." Flynn was already at the door. "You can admire Thomas's work at the office. We have appointments to run."

I managed one last thank you for Thomas, then I headed after Flynn.



The next morning, Flynn met me in the parking lot and took me to breakfast. Afterward, he parked the Lincoln in front of the office. "You go in and get the appointments," he said. "I'll stay in the car."

I got out and opened the rear and pulled my jacket off the hanger. Flynn had made me use "Never sit down while wearing your jacket," he had said. "Never."

Walking through the narrow halls of the office, I tried to feel all at home and comfortable like I usually did. The office was the same. False walls and dim, narrow corridors. It smelled like Cooper's cigarettes and Chloe's lilac perfume. I could hear the darts hitting the board in the coffee room. The low murmur of the phone girls in their little semi-soundproof booths was exactly the same as always.

Still, I felt different. I felt taller. I felt like I was wearing Superman's cape or something.

I rounded the corner to the sales area, and I walked up to Caroline's dispatch window.

She looked up before I spoke. I swear, I saw her eyes get wide then get darker and sort of spark. Her cheeks flushed, and she smiled. She smoothed her crew sweater, stood up, and leaned forward toward the window. "Can I help you, sir?" she asked.

"I need a couple of appointments, Caroline."

I wouldn't say her jaw dropped so much as her whole face went sort of limp like she'd lost control of all the muscles at once.

"Rich?"

I smiled. "That is a very nice sweater," I said.

"Rich!"

"I need one for me and one for Flynn."

She blinked. She adjusted her headset and fell back into her seat. "Yeah," she said. "Sure. Here you go." She handed me two

appointment sheets

I checked the addresses and checked the map on the wall "The Heights?"

"I made those myself," she said. "Prequalified and big houses. One has a guest house. My notes are on the back."

I turned over one of the sheets In her fluid hand there was a list of personal interests, kids, cats, dogs, and hobbies

"Thanks, Caroline," I said, and I started to turn.

"Rich," she said.

"Yeah?"

"You look—" She swallowed and I watched her sweater rise and fall once. "You look really good," she said, and I liked the way she had trouble saying it

In the car, Flynn asked me how it went. I smiled and handed him the appointment sheets. He looked at the addresses and nodded "Double team both appointments?" he asked.

"On the program?"

"Always."

"Absolutely."

At the breakfast meeting at the I-Hop on the first of May, Cooper decided we—meaning everybody in sales—weren't producing enough. Flynn's closing ratio was 1:1. He never missed. He also hardly ever worked. So, in Cooper's opinion, he was the worst of us all. Flynn didn't seem to be concerned by that

Fat Bob was up and ranting about how he was going to kick my ass this month. Caroline was down the table a ways, sitting with Chloe and Francis, the women who ran the phone mill. Chloe, with her mascara crayon eyes and smooth helmet of nape-cut, blonde hair, stared openly at me. Caroline checked me out now and again. This was pretty new to me, and it pretty well kept me distracted from Bob and Cooper.

Francis seemed to be distracted by her own thoughts. Flynn sat beside her. She wasn't staring at him, but I could tell she wasn't seeing anything else in the room either.

"... from every one of you," Cooper said.

"Right now?" Vernon Wright asked. He was one of the new guys from the last batch of trainees, an auto body man by training, trying his hand in sales, hoping he didn't have to buff and putty again.

"Right now," Cooper said. "Francis, write this down."

Francis didn't move. She just stared at the wall.

Flynn put a hand on her arm. She squeaked and jumped. I thought she was going to hit the ceiling.

She looked at Flynn and whispered something.

He pointed at Cooper.

She looked to Cooper. "Boss?"

"Pay attention, Francis. We need totals this month. I want you to write down the sales goals for each man."

She nodded and pulled a notebook and pen from under the table.

"Gross insured totals for the month," Cooper says. "Rich."

I nodded.

"You're the man to beat, you go first."

Last month, I'd hit ten mil. I knew this game. It was called paint a pretty picture for the boss. I added 200K, figuring that would appease him. "Ten mil, two hundred."

"Got that Francis?"

"Yes."

"OK. Rich, I'm going to separate you and Flynn this month. I want you both turning in higher totals. Flynn, what's your number?"

"Ten," Flynn said.

"Match Rich, or you're fired," Cooper said.

Flynn smiled and nodded, but I thought I saw something new in those deep mist eyes, maybe a hint of a thundercloud. It sent a primal chill up my spine. For a second, I thought Flynn was going to get up and leave.

"You didn't make enough off my work last month, Cooper?" Flynn asked.

The room went dead, like the air was just sucked out of it, like we were suddenly in space or under water.

"You aren't living up to your potential." Cooper's face was red. He waved a gold-ringed finger at Flynn. "You're skimming the cream appointments. You should be turning in fifty a month."

"Did you make money or lose money on my work last month?"

"Part of my job," Cooper said to the whole group, "is to help my salesmen reach their potential and fulfill their dreams. *My* dream is to be free from worrying about helping you men. Vernon's dream," he pointed at the chrome-and-putty man, "is a home on the Snake River. To get what I want, I help him get what he wants. Sometimes that means I have to push." He pointed at Flynn. "When a good man gets lazy, I push. I'm putting you on notice, Flynn. Light a fire under that ass of yours, or walk away."

Now I could see the storm clouds. I could feel the electricity moving from Flynn out through the table and into every person in the room. I looked down at my trousers, and I swear the tiny threads were standing on end.

"I'll make sure you get what you want, Cooper," Flynn said.

I didn't like the sound of it. Not at all.

Around the table Cooper went. Some of the guys were all fired up, and they bit off big numbers that had nothing to do with their past performance. They'd strut for a day or two, then they'd start looking desperate.

The desperation would come from hearing Cooper's threat. If he would fire Flynn, what would he do to them for missing their numbers?

Finally, only Fat Bob was left, and he was looking pretty smug.

"Bob?" Cooper asked.

"I'm tired of seeing Rich's name in the top slot of the board," he said. He looked right at me when he said it. His thin lips were stretched out enough that his pudgy cheeks had double wrinkles down them. "I'm going to hit fifty-five this month."

Now, I didn't like Bob much, and nobody thought he could do fifty-five mil. Still, he was looking pretty clear in the eye and way too confident in his number. Something was up. I decided right there that I wasn't going to play a game if the rules weren't the same for him as for me, and since I didn't know the rules, I'd just do what I'd been doing.

The meeting broke, and I was headed for Flynn when Caroline came up to me. She said, "Don't let that asshole beat you, Rich."

"They're up to some scheme," I said.

"I heard them. They're going to set Bob up with an office in Oregon, but to do it, he has to have the numbers to justify it."

"If he takes an office, he'll be gone, right?"

"If you take an office, we'll be gone," she said.

I'm pretty sure I lost control of all the muscles in my face. While I was recovering, she took my hand and pressed appointment papers into it. "I made them," she said. "When you've finished with them, come and tell me."

"Caroline."

"You're welcome," she said.

"What about Flynn?"

"Francis is taking care of him."

I left the I-Hop, but I didn't head to the office. I headed for the Lincoln.

Flynn hung his jacket over the Lincoln's back seat, and we took off. He had a handful of appointments, and he had that storm about to break look in his eyes.

"They're gunning for us," I said.

"Cooper and Bob don't know how to enjoy a good thing."

"What can we do?"

"Believe what he says and give him exactly what he wants," Flynn says.

He pulled the Lincoln into a Mercedes car lot.

"Flynn, we have to get to work. You need to hit today if we're gonna—"

"How long have you known me, Rich?"

"A couple months."

"We've spent a lot of time together."

"Yeah."

"I'm going to tell you something because I think you have what it takes to make it work in this life."

"Don't get high—"

"Rich, there's all kinds of magic in the world."

I stared into his bottomless eyes. He'd said that before. In the coffee room. "Some kinds of magic come from rituals," he had said, then he tossed that crooked dart straight into the bull.

He popped open the door of the Lincoln, but he didn't get out. "The truth is the most powerful lie there is. Before you met me, you thought you were a liar taking people's money. Have you ever seen me lie to any one?"

I thought for a minute. I couldn't remember having ever seen him lie. Then it came to me. "You said you'd show me a trick if I hit all the darts inside the doubles ring."

"I showed you *the* program. With Linda. With Gill."

"Everybody lies," I said.

"No. Everybody doesn't. Think about it. And while you're thinking about it, take a look at the appointments you have."

It didn't make sense. The appointments seemed safer than the words he'd spoken. I pulled them out of my vest pocket and looked at them. "Vermeer Valley Estates?"

"Uh huh."

"These aren't good appointments. These are multimillion dollar houses."

"You mean they aren't easy appointments."

"It'll take a hell of trick to get me in there."

"Some magic comes from doing the right thing in the moment."

Flynn, we're screwed. How the hell am I gonna—"

"To start with, you show up looking like you belong there. Then, you make damn sure you feel like you belong there. If you can feel it, they will too. After that, you do what you always do. You tell them the truth."

Ten minutes later, I was test driving a cherry red Mercedes convertible for a week. The Lincoln was in the body shop getting a freezing and dent face lift, and Flynn was behind the wheel of the lot owner's Shelby Cobra—and not one of those cheap Mustang things—it was a real, honest to God 250-mile-an-hour Shelby Cobalt blue and white racing stripe son of a bitch muscle car.

I didn't really get it at the time. Flynn told me he needed my help. Needed big totals. He told me I had it in me if I had the balls for it. Everybody has their own truth," he says. "Look 'em right in the eye. Put love in your head and heart. Believe they are your lover, your mother, your father, your siblings, your best friend. Believe they are more important to you than anyone else ever. They'll know. Give them that. Hear what they want, feel what they love. Give them their truth in your words. Tell them the truth. I'm about to give Cooper and Bob their truth. I just gave you yours. Now you have to live it."

The Benz was nice. When I got to the gates guarding the Estates from people like me, I pulled right up to them. The guard came out and smiled. He liked the car.

OK, I thought, this is just like the Country Club.

My lover, my brother.

I looked at the guard station, and on the stool inside, I saw a book.

Before he could start up his guard script with "Can I help you," I said, "Lots of time to read sitting in there alone, I bet."

He glanced over his shoulder quick. He probably wasn't supposed to be reading on the job.

I'd be reading too, if I was sitting out here," I added.

He smiled and came up to the side of the car.

"You likely get time to think more than most folks," I said. Seemed like a man that reads books in a box the size of a phone booth might spend a lot of time in his own head. "I'd guess you watch a lot of different folks coming and going."

He was a guy about my age, then. Maybe twenty-five. When he got up to the side of the car, he stopped, careful not to touch it. Training, I guessed.

"Yeah," he said, "I see a lot of folks. Haven't seen you before."

I opened the car door. He stepped back. I got out. In my head, I had two thoughts going. First, *I love this guy that reads and watches people come and go. What a cool job*; second, *What the hell am I thinking trying to get into the Estates?*

"Rich," I said. "Haven't seen you before." I caught the beginning of his squint, and I added, "Course, I've never been here during the day."

He relaxed. "I'm up here to visit with Lenny Farr."

"Lenny went out this morning."

"Rachel too?"

"Nah. She's still in the house."

"Too bad I missed him," I said. "Well, I guess I have some time to kill. What are you reading?"

We walked over to the booth, and he showed me his book. Part of me expected some sleazy, soldier of fortune thing. No. Not my new buddy. He was a self-help man. *Make It Yours* was his book.

I had seen that one in Cooper's office, so I figured the author was a high-energy guru. "Setting your goals and making them real?" I asked.

My guard straightened up.

It meant something. Flynn's eyes, those eyes that sucked every detail out of life, flashed through my head.

It came to me. My guard was ready to recite. "Go ahead," I said. "Lay it out."

And he did, too. That man had a list of wants. And at the end of it, he looked me in the eye and said, "and I want to drive a Mercedes like that."

"I'm sure you will," I said. "If I can drive one, so can you."

He beamed.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Ronny." He touched his guard cap when he said it.

"Ronny, I better get on up and check in with Rachel," I said.

He nodded and hit the gate button. The gate lifted, and I headed for my car.

"Nice suit, Rich," he said. "You have a good afternoon."

I waved back. "I will, Ronny."

I drove on into the Estates.

I pulled up on the wraparound drive in front of a Tudor mansion that looked like it would need twenty folks just to trim the hedges. My heart was pumping hard. Part of me was pretty sure I'd be in jail before the end of the day. Another part of me couldn't shake the look in Flynn's eyes when he said we were going to give Cooper what he wanted.

Between Flynn's look and Caroline's hand pressing the appointments into mine, I was in for the run.

I knocked. I was ready. My brain was running a solid loop. *Tell their truth. Tell their truth. See their world and give them their truth.*

Rachel herself opened one of the double doors.

I thought I was ready. She was maybe thirty, and the top of her head came up to my nose. I swear, I could smell the things she wanted on the wood oil and window cleaner air that wafted over her on the way out of the house.

My first thought was how nice it would be to tuck her soft, blonde curls under my chin and just sit and listen to her breathe.

> The new men were up and screaming. They saw new houses, boats, cars, and trips the hell out of Idaho.

She and I just sort of looked at each other for what seemed like an hour before I noticed the rest of her Somewhere on the grounds, there was a swimming pool I smelled it on her skin She used it a lot Clear skin and broad shoulders in a blue cotton tank top showed off a pair that must have been models for mannequins at Victoria s Secret. She was barefoot, and wore black silk Kung Fu pants with an ornate red dragon embroidered on her right hip

"I m Rich," I finally said. "You must be Rachel " I put out my hand and took hers exactly the way I'd seen Flynn do it. "Caroline sent me up to visit, but she didn't tell me how beautiful this home was."

Rachel smiled "Caroline," she said Her eyes shifted from me to my car and back

"You wanted to ask about fires "

"Oh, Caroline. Yes Rich

I stepped up to the threshold still holding her hand. "Caroline said you were up here alone a lot."

Her hand tensed

"That you wanted to feel safer, to protect some of the things you value."

Her hand warmed

Flynn's eyes Flynn's hand on my shoulder Flynn shaking hands with Gill

"Rachel," I said, "I have some time before my next appointment If you have some coffee, I can sit and chat a while "

Her eyes brightened. Her hand warmed, and I walked into her home.

Rachel was alone a lot She just wanted to talk I gave her my undivided attention for two hours. We never talked about fire, about insurance, about anything. We walked the grounds Mostly, we talked about the plants Some, we talked about her mother in Michigan and how they didn't get along For a while, we talked about Lenny, but it killed me to see her eyes get so sad, so I steered us back to the plants

At the door, I took her hand again and pulled her into a long, warm hug Her curls were as soft as I'd imagined. Her breath was smooth and warm She held me tight for a minute, and when we separated, she was crying

"I'm sorry, Rich," she said. "I never let you tell me about the fire stuff "

"Rachel, you didn't ask me up here to buy fire insurance," I said, and it was true

"Will you show it to me anyway?"

"Are you sure?"

She nodded I went to the car and got my case

After we signed the papers and she gave me the checks, she gave me the names of a couple women from her book group With those, and the other appointment Caroline had given me, I had the best day I'd ever had. Hell, it was the best day I d ever heard of

On the way out, I stopped at the guard station and gave Ronny one of Thomas Chesterman s cards "You go see him Tell him I sent you He'll put you in a suit like mine." I shook Ronny's hand. He waved me on. "Thanks, Mr. Rich!" he called

I didn t see Flynn until the next day. He pulled up in the lot the same time I did, and those storm clouds were still boiling behind his eyes. He nodded my way, and we went into the building together

Caroline was waiting at the door.

Flynn put a hand on my shoulder, winked, and said, "I'll see you at the meeting in ten."

Caroline had on a sundress cotton and sheer, and fluted from the hips to mid thigh. The low neckline framed a delicate gold chain and golden cross that pointed downward

She grabbed my arm and pulled me into her dispatch cube

God, I can't say how many times I'd wanted to go into that little booth. It smelled like talcum powder after a hot shower. Her hair was loose and pulled back, and her widow s peak seemed to press downward on her forehead, making worry wrinkles

"Caroline, what's wrong?"

"They set you up," she said.

"Set me up?"

"You and Flynn I saw the books. You sell too much, and they know *he* can "

"Nobody sells too much, Caroline "

"They can train five men a week. Those five men will turn in three contracts in the first week. New men make the lowest possible percentage Of the new group, Cooper loses three or four low producers over the next five weeks Over a year, they make more money by training new men and fielding them "

"Totals will be lower."

"Profit goes up "

"OK, if they set us up, how?"

"The appointments I gave you "

"They were up in the Estates "

"It's a gated community."

"I was there "

"We didn't know that We never call into gated communities You can't get past the guards even if someone sets an appointment Neighborhood covenants "

"Rich!" It was Cooper's bull voice

I kissed Caroline on the cheek It warmed me to see her turn red "Rich "

"It s going to be fine " I squeezed her hand and headed for the meeting I suspected was supposed to be the first of several nails in my coffin

Flynn. Damn, he was a piece of work He had seen Cooper and Fat Bob coming

The meeting room was full Every man Cooper had, including five men I'd never seen before, were there, all sitting in nice neat rows. All in bad suits. All scared in the eyes.

Flynn s jacket hung on the back of the door He stood against the wall to the right of the door.

All eyes were on me

"Thank you for gracing us with your presence, Rich." Cooper was at the whiteboard in front. He was nervous. The stains under his arms showed it Bob was front-and-center and practically shaking with anticipation

I nodded to Cooper Then, I pulled the hanger out of my pocket, unfolded it, slipped off my jacket, and hung it on the back of the door with Flynn's

Cooper glared at me

I stood next to Flynn

The meeting unfolded like most second-day-of-the-month meetings Jennings, a steady man, turned in a 2K contract Wills and Tellen turned up nothing Vallenrow had hit for a rental for 400 It was all good for the second of the month

The new guys were showing some excitement. They were counting their low future percentage commissions, and they were pretty sure they were going to do better than those other guys. I could see Cooper had been blowing wind up their shorts.

Finally, Cooper flourished his blue marker "Before we hear from our superstar performers in the back of the room," he said "I want to introduce our new sales manager "

Caroline slipped in quietly and stood beside me She hooked a hand in mine. I wanted to jump up and down She thought I was a doomed man, and she still took my hand

I kept it to myself

"Bob," Cooper said, "would you come up and say a few words?"

Bob couldn't say only a few words even if the words were "help me" and more than that would kill him. He ran on for ten full minutes about his favorite book, *Run Until You Get There*, and how important it was for him to give back to the new guys and help them run like him

I glanced at Flynn The storm was brewing. Oh yeah

Cooper cut in again. "OK, Bob, now I want to post your totals to show the new men why you're their sales manager "

Continued on page 80

PORTRAIT OF AN UNIDENTIFIED ANGEL

BY WENDY A. SHARICK

When Michele first saw the angel, he took it for either a fever dream or an assassin.

He woke to a hot, dimly lit room and a shadowy figure standing by his bedside. Even before he remembered where he was, he remembered that he was in danger. He swung himself to a sitting position and reached behind his back for the dagger stuck into his belt. *How did they find me here?* he thought wildly. It crossed his mind that one of the brothers of this stinking backwater hospital might have sold him out. If that were so, he'd make them pay for it. If he survived.

"Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio." The shadowy figure's voice was low and soft, but there was something threatening about the precise enunciation of the syllables.

"If you've come to kill me—" Michele broke off, startled. It was dark in the tiny hospital room, the only light coming from a thin ray of sunlight that slanted through a narrow window, and a diffuse glow of lamplight from the corridor. But there was enough light for Michele to see that the man standing by his bedside was naked except for a pair of large wings.

Michele rubbed his eyes with one hand. His skin felt hot with fever. *This is absurd,* he thought. *What sort of bounty hunter comes armed and unarmed and wearing costume wings?* Still, he measured with his eyes the distance from the bed to his sword, sheathed and propped up against the wall in a corner, readying himself to lunge for it if the figure made any threatening motion.

But the figure remained motionless. "I'm not here to kill you," it said.

Michele eased his grip on the dagger slightly. "Then who are you, and what do you want?" he snapped.

The figure laughed. "What I want is simple. I want what everyone wants from the famous Caravaggio. A painting. More precisely, a portrait. As for what I am, I think your eyes can tell you, that." The figure stretched one wing in a fluid, flexing motion that recalled a bird of prey about to take flight. It was a movement that no pair of stage wings, however cleverly constructed, could possibly duplicate. Michele felt the familiar, almost comfortable fear of attack transmute itself into a different kind of fear.

He let go of the dagger and wiped his sweaty, sick palm on his linen shirt. "What use does an angel have for a portrait?" he asked, when he thought he could keep his voice steady.

The angel shrugged, with another graceful arching of wings. "What use does an angel have for anything? Perhaps I'd just like to see what a real angel—instead of boys, putti, cupids, and men in wings made of pigeon feathers—

THE WINGS UNFURLED, THE BEAM OF SUNLIGHT ON ITS BACK SIDE SPARKLED

Michele snorted. He pointed at the patch of sunlight in the middle of the floor. "All right. Let me see what a real angel looks like, then."

The angel stepped into the light in two long strides. First it turned its back toward Michele, so that he could see the two huge wings that sprouted seamlessly from the shoulder blades, curving upward, and then back down, so that the long pinion feathers nearly brushed the floor. Fully extended, they would have stretched from wall to wall. The sunlight picked out each long, white feather and made it shimmer in a way that Michele itched to paint.

Then the angel turned to face him. It was naked, and sexless, with only smooth, hairless skin where its genitals would have been. Its body was as muscular as that of an old Roman statue, and its skin had the translucent and hard sheen of marble. The face was smooth, unbearded, and would have seemed bland except for the jet black ringlets of hair that framed it, and the black, intent irises of the eyes.

Michele knew that he couldn't refuse. He had to paint this creature. Still, certain habits of bargaining asserted themselves. Never appear too eager to accept a commission- it had been his rule when he'd painted portraits at five scudi a head, and it was still his rule now, when his altarpieces fetched a hundred times that or more. "I would be honored to paint the portrait of a personage as illustrious as yourself, but as you can see, I am ill." He gestured around the little room. "And I have urgent business that requires me to travel to Rome as soon as I am able." Urgent business. To make restitution for the killing he had committed four years ago. To have lifted the bounty that had kept killers on his trail all those years. And maybe, at last, to dispel the guilt that had tracked him more closely than any bounty hunter.

"You won't be strong enough to travel for at least a week," replied the angel. "But I think you'll be strong enough to paint."

Michele nodded. He had already asked a lay brother to bring him some canvas and paints, so that he could paint something to pass the time. The brother had only gaped at him, as if he had asked for the moon.

"And, of course," said the angel, as if reading Michele's thought, "I will supply canvas, pigments, brushes, and everything else that is necessary for the completion of the work."

And payment?" Michele asked, as casually as he could manage. Recent . misadventures … had left him with an empty purse in addition to his other troubles.

The angel smiled, looking again as if it read Michele's mind. "We can discuss exact terms of payment when the painting is complete- but I assure you that you will be properly rewarded."

Michele shrugged. "I suppose that as an angel, you're unlikely to cheat me." He smiled quickly, to show that he meant no offense at the suggestion.

The angel only nodded. "I will return tomorrow with the necessary materials." It gave a short bow, and then unfurled its wings and vanished.

Michele blinked, rubbed his eyes again. Then he chuckled. "Why so surprised, Michele?" he said to himself. "You don't suppose the angel rode on horseback in the summer heat to commission a painting from Caravaggio in Porto Ercole?" He looked at the spot where the angel had vanished, and sighed. "If only I could travel to Rome so quickly."

Still, he felt more cheerful than he had for days. He had feared that the series of mishaps that had left him sick and stranded in this little coastal town were not just bad luck, but a decree of Fate that he would never reach Rome, never reach his chance at redemption. But now he could see things in a different light. Perhaps he had been brought to this place so that he could paint the angel.

And surely, he thought, *a man who has been asked to paint an angel is not beyond redemption.*

He awoke the next morning and wondered if he had dreamed the whole thing. Even at mid-morning, the room was sweltering. He picked at the bowl of thin porridge they had brought him for breakfast. The room looked dingy in the morning light, with its peeling terra-cotta-colored walls. He could hear some unfortunate patient moaning, somewhere down the corridor. The little hospital seemed an unlikely place to encounter an angel.

Still, an impatience grew in him as the day wore on. He found himself glancing up at the sound of footsteps in the hall, expecting a winged silhouette to appear in the doorway. He watched the window, waiting for the afternoon sun to come and paint the little room in golden light. He dozed.

He awoke to find a canvas, stretched and set upon an easel, standing beside the bed. Next to the canvas was the angel, standing still with arms folded, dark eyes intent on Michele.

Michele sat up, rubbed his eyes, looked to make sure that the angel was still there. Then he scowled. "How long have you been here? You should have awakened me."

"I have not been here long," replied the angel mildly.

Michele stood, carefully. He felt weak and lightheaded, but well enough otherwise. Feeling self-conscious under the angel's gaze, he examined his shirt, which was dirty, and his black hose, which had a large rent exposing one knee. His doublet and boots weren't in any better condition, and he wasn't about to put them on in this heat, anyway. The angel didn't seem to notice.

He turned his attention to the canvas. It was of good quality, tightly woven, and looked to have been sized already with glue. He touched the surface lightly. It was dry. Good. That would save a bit of time. Michele picked up the sack that lay next to the easel and began examining its contents, laying them out on the bed or on the little wooden table that was the room's only other furniture. Brushes, linseed oil, packets of pigments, a stone for grinding them—everything he needed was there.

Michele grunted his approval. "I'll need to prime the canvas. That will take a while, and I won't need you until it's done. You can come back later, if you like."

The angel shook its head. "I'd rather stay and watch you work."

Michele sighed. The way the angel watched him was disconcerting. He had the feeling it would watch with equal fascination whether he painted a masterpiece or picked his nose. He shrugged that thought aside and got to work.

He stood in front of the easel, studying the room. The sun outside was still high in the sky; the ray of sunlight from the window illuminated a patch of dirty blanket on the bed. But later, when the sun was lower, it would be *there,* he thought, lighting up that patch of floor by the wall. He moved the easel back as far as he could and still have room to work. He studied the room again, pictured the way the light would look. He picked up the canvas and turned it so that the long sides were horizontal. He wanted to be sure to have room to paint the long shadows cast by the angel's wings.

He mixed the primer- glue, gesso, and white lead. He laid a thick, even coat on the canvas and smoothed it carefully.

"This needs to dry," he told the angel. "Not completely. Perhaps half an hour."

The angel nodded, serenely.

Michele sat down on the bed and mopped his brow with the

sleeve of his shirt. He ground some red ochre for the next coat of priming. He wiped his forehead again and frowned at the angel who stood watching him, patient and unperspiring.

"Which angel are you?" he asked, more to break the silence than anything else. "Tell me your name."

"Guess." The angel smiled.

"Guess?"

"I think that you can guess my name."

Michele frowned. Now he *was* genuinely curious. Why did the angel think that he could guess its name? He had no special knowledge of angels. He had painted them, but had never bothered himself about them otherwise. If the angel had carried a trumpet, or a flaming sword, or some other traditional implement, the name would have been obvious. A naked, empty handed angel didn't offer many clues.

He shrugged. "I don't see how I could possibly guess."

"Think it over," said the angel. "I'll give you until the painting is finished to guess."

"And what happens if I don't guess correctly?" he asked warily.

"I'll tell you the right answer."

Michele snorted. There had to be a catch—there was always a catch. He looked at the angel's quiet, mysterious smile and felt a shiver pass through him. They both fell silent for a time. At last, the first layer of priming was dry enough. Michele mixed the red ochre into the primer until it was a deep brown-red. He painted that carefully over the first coat of priming, smoothed it. When it was partly dry, he gestured with the brush. "Stand there," he ordered the angel.

It went meekly. "A little more to the left." Michele instructed. "Turn toward the doorway. Spread your wings."

The wings unfurled. The beam of sunlight caught the right one. The feathers on its back side sparkled, and the wing cast a long black shadow that cut across the angel's right calf and along the wall beyond.

Michele studied the scene. Striking, but too static. "Stretch out your right arm. Lean forward."

The angel complied. Michele considered. Yes, this was right—it had the same contrast of light and shadow, but now there was a sense of movement. The angel might be just landing, or about to take flight. "Hold that pose," Michele ordered. Using the end of the brush handle, he lightly scratched the contours of the scene into the still wet ground coat: the curve of the top of each wing, the arcing shadow, the line of the outstretched arm.

When he was finished, he set the brush down on the little table. He was suddenly aware of being very tired. He sat down on the bed and gestured at the painting. "Now it needs to dry. In this heat, it should be ready by morning."

The angel straightened, folding its wings. "And you need time to rest. Tomorrow, then." It gestured with one hand, and the angel, the painting, everything down to the last paintbrush shone with a fiery light and then vanished.

Michele blinked. "It had better keep that canvas somewhere dry," he muttered. Then he slept.

He awoke with a headache and an evil temper. He was still more than half afraid that he had dreamed the entire encounter with the angel. He searched the room, looking for some smear of paint or scrap of pigment that would prove the existence of the painting he had begun the night before. He found nothing. And yet he was eager to get back to work.

He fell back into bed, weak and shaking from the exertion. He slept uneasily, plagued by confused and violent dreams.

He awoke suddenly. Someone stood at his bedside, bending over him. His dagger was in his hand and driving at the other's throat almost instantly. A cold hand caught him by the wrist, so tightly that he cried out in pain and dropped the knife. "Michele it's me," said a soft voice. The angel's voice.

Michele sat up, rubbing his wrist and trembling. He tried to think of an adequate way to apologize for having threatened an angel with cold steel. *You never learn*, he thought to himself. *Even now, you idiot, you strike first and think second.*

The angel touched him gently on the arm. "I'm sorry that I hurt you."

That the angel would apologize to *him* was so ludicrous that Michele laughed. "No, no, I'm sorry that I attacked you. There are a lot of people trying to kill me now. In the confusion of waking, I took you for one of them."

The angel nodded. "Are you afraid of death?" it asked. There was a strange note in its voice, almost like envy. Michele realized that this was a creature who would never know death and, perhaps, never know fear.

"I'm not afraid of anything," he lied. He chuckled ruefully. "*Nec spe, nec metu*."

"No hope, no fear?" queried the angel.

"Something my friends and I used to say, back in Rome. It was our motto." He shook his head. "We were young and stupid then."

"And now?"

"Now we're older and stupid. And most of us have pieces on our heads. Including me, lucky dog that I am."

"What for?" asked the angel.

"I killed a man." Michele couldn't look into the angel's eyes. He looked at the floor, at his bare feet, the dirt under his yellowing toenails. The angel said nothing, so he went on. "His name was Ranuccio Tomassoni. We'd fought before. He was a loudmouth, and a bully, and he didn't pay his gambling debts." Michele chuckled bitterly. "Though I suppose if you'd asked him, he'd have said the same thing about me."

"It was during the celebration of the Pope's coronation. Everyone in Rome was in the streets, or in the taverns, singing, dancing, drinking, and brawling. I was with three friends, and we came upon Ranuccio, his brother Giovan Francesco, and two of their friends." Michele paused and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"And you fought," the angel prompted.

"Yes. Ranuccio was angry—something about a girl. We traded insults, and when I'd had enough, I drew my sword. And everyone else drew theirs.

"It was over quickly. I parried a thrust from Ranuccio, and then stabbed him in the thigh. Giovan Francesco killed my friend Petronio and then came after me. He wounded me in the forehead and blood ran into my eyes and blinded me. I thought that I was dead, then, but my friends managed to drag me away from the fight.

"Ranuccio died the next morning. I left the city just before Cardinal Borghese put a price on my head. I haven't been back since." He'd killed a man, without even a thought. What would the angel say?

"You're going back now?" All Michele could read in the angel's expression was simple curiosity. He didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

Yes. Because the Cardinal has promised me a pardon if I go to Rome and present sincere evidence of my repentance." Michele could not help but give the last few words a bitter twist.

"You doubt the Cardinal's sincerity?" the angel asked

Michele laughed "Oh, Cardinal Borghese is sincere He's a sincere lover of art. He expects the evidence of my repentance to be rendered on canvas "

"Then what is it you fear?"

Michele reached down and picked up the dagger from the floor He threw it down on the bed next to him. "This I'm afraid to kill again, and I'm afraid to die " He looked at the angel and chuckled bleakly "Good thing I didn't kill you I don t think even Cardinal Borghese could protect me from the consequences of that

The angel smiled and bent to pick up the dagger It held it comfortably, familiarly. Michele flinched as it brought the knife up between them

"You couldn't hurt me with this," said the angel. "Watch " Holding up its left hand, it set the point of the dagger against the palm and pushed firmly but slowly, like a cook skewering a piece of meat Michele watched the point emerge from the back of the hand until it protruded a good three inches The angel's expression never wavered from one of cheerful serenity There was no blood, either on the blade or on the hand

After a moment, the angel withdrew the blade, equally slowly The edges of the wound drew together and sealed. The angel held out the hand, palm up, to Michele. He bent over it. The palm looked perfectly unmarked He stretched out his hand toward the angel s. then hesitated. The angel nodded Michele ran one trembling finger over the area where the dagger had entered. The palm was cold, dry, and hard, like an oaken tabletop polished by years of use

Michele shivered, more frightened than he had been since the first time the angel had appeared to him

The angel dropped its hand abruptly. "Forgive me," it said. "I have been showing off Vanity and pride are the sins angels are most prone to " It grasped the dagger by the blade and held the hilt out toward Michele

He took it gingerly and wiped the blade on his shirt, not so much to clean it as to dirty it again, and then sheathed it He looked around and saw that the painting had reappeared, with its easel He inspected it carefully. It was dry and showed no sign of having been moved. "Well, shall we begin on the painting? The afternoon light won't last forever "

The afternoon light lasted a long time—one reason, at least, to be glad that it was summer Michele worked quickly, beginning with the angel s head and working down to the upper torso and the outlines of the wings The angel was a perfect model, never moving as much as a hair and never needing a break to eat or drink or stretch muscles cramped from holding still. For once, it was the painter, and not the model, who tired first

Enough," said Michele, at last, letting the brush fall from aching fingers "I can do no more today "

The angel moved for the first time in hours, straightening and folding its wings fluidly and gracefully

Michele shook his head. "You'll spoil me for painting mere mortals " Then he grinned. "But I think I can guess your name." He had thought it over during the rare moments when his thoughts had not been completely consumed by the painting

Guess then "

I think that you must be the archangel Michael. First, because who better to paint the angel Michael than a painter named Michelangelo?" He wondered, briefly, enviously, if the *other* Michelangelo had painted this angel as well. He pushed that thought aside. "And second, because I saw earlier today that you have handled a blade before " He could picture this angel with fiery sword in hand, ready to smite its foes

"Your reasoning is not bad," said the angel. "But I am not Michael "

Michele shrugged. "There's still plenty of time for me to guess "

Rest now," said the angel "We will continue tomorrow." Angel and painting vanished once more

Michele spent much of the night and the next day in feverish sleep, punctuated by periods of wakefulness brought on by pains in his head or stomach He ate sparingly of the food that was brought to him, but drank the water thirstily. He seemed unable to quench his thirst

Again, he awoke to find angel and canvas standing at his bedside "How is it that you always sneak in here while I sleep?" he grumbled, climbing painfully out of bed

I like to come and go quietly,' replied the angel

Michele shook his head and picked up his brush

He quickly lost himself in the work of painting He worked on the wings that afternoon It was a demanding task—he had to capture the way the light fell just a bit differently on each feather, and the tiny shadows that the overlapping feathers cast upon one another. He painted slowly, carefully. And yet, when he was finished for the day, the massive and intricate wings were nearly complete

The angel moved to stand beside him, and they studied the half-finished painting together Michele thought the angel looked pleased, though it was hard to read the expressions on its face, which always looked grave and cheerful at the same time

"I have another guess at your name." Michele said at last

The angel nodded

"Gabriel," he said. "Gabriel is the most painted angel—everyone paints an Annunciation Having so many incorrect images of you, you are naturally anxious to have a good likeness painted

The angel laughed, a bright ringing sound. "Once again, I cannot fault your reasoning But I am not Gabriel I am frequently painted, though seldom as an angel

Michele frowned An angel not painted as an angel? That made little sense He sighed "Well, perhaps I'll have a better guess tomorrow

The angel departed, and Michele retired to bed to sleep

The next morning, the pains in his stomach were severe enough that he could not bring himself to eat The lay brothers of the hospital and, later, the doctor they summoned fussed over him, fluttering their robes and twittering like birds Michele closed his eyes, did his best to ignore their pokings and proddings He wished them gone, knowing the angel would not come while they were present The image of his half-finished painting danced in his mind's eye—a luminous head, torso, and pair of wings floating in empty space

At last they all left, and Michele slept He dreamed that he was pursued by mutilated angels—legless, headless, or wingless—who called out to him to guess their names

The dream made his mood somber, even when he awoke to find the angel, with a full complement of limbs, standing at his bedside He climbed painfully out of bed, ignoring the protests from his aching body

As he mixed pigments, he glanced frequently at the angel It kept its unwavering attention fixed on his every move Something about its dark gaze, which he had always seen before as one of

benign curiosity, now seemed sinister. Even when he looked away, he could feel that stare. Uneasy thoughts brewed in his mind as he worked.

Vanity, and pride are the two sins angels are most prone to, the angel had said. And, *I am frequently painted, though seldom as an angel.*

What angel had sinned through pride? And what angel was not an angel?

Michele set down the palette, hands trembling. He started to cross himself and stopped. It seemed a feeble gesture from a sinner like himself, already ensnared by this creature. He dropped his hand instead to the hilt of his dagger—an equally futile gesture, but one more in character.

The angel—or devil—raised an eyebrow as Michele forced himself to stand and face it.

"I think now that I know your name," said Michele. He was not entirely able to keep the fear out of his voice.

The angel nodded, a half smile on its face. If it noticed his agitation, it did not seem disturbed by it.

Michele swallowed. "I think that you must be Satan, here for the soul of an unwary sinner."

For the first time, he saw the angel's expression deviate from its usual calm. Its eyes widened in an unmistakable mark of astonishment, and then it burst into laughter. It was laughter so infectious that Michele found himself joining in, feeling a powerful rush of relief as he knew that his suspicions had been wrong.

"Michele," said the angel, "I see how you reasoned your way to this guess, and I see that I must be wary about what sort of cryptic remarks I let drop. But let me assure you, I am not Satan, nor any of his minions, but a true angel and a servant of Heaven. And I am not here to trick you out of your soul. The fate of your soul is decided by your own actions."

"I'm not sure if that's a comforting thought," said Michele, releasing his grip on the knife. He picked up the palette, studied it, and then the half-finished canvas. He grinned. "But if you are not Satan, then I can paint you with a clear conscience." *But if you are not Satan,* he thought, *then who are you?*

The next day, he was unable to eat or drink. They brought him a priest this time, instead of a doctor. He refused this one's ministrations much as he had the other's. It would take too long for him to be properly confessed. He was saving his energy for painting.

As the priest at last turned to leave, Michele caught him by the sleeve, struck by a sudden idea. "Angels," he croaked, through dry lips.

"Angels?" The priest looked confused.

"Yes. Angels. Name as many as you can."

"Gabriel," said the man, slowly. "Michael. Raphael."

Michele snorted. "Not that one. If it hasn't got my name, it's not going to have some other painter's."

"I beg your pardon?"

Michele shook his head and discovered that it made him dizzy. "Never mind. Name some more."

"Uriel. Uziel..." A long pause. "I am sorry. I can think of no more."

Michele nodded, and released his grip on the man's sleeve. The priest scurried off, murmuring to himself.

Michele slept, then awoke, knowing it was afternoon.

"Uriel," he said, without opening his eyes.

"No," replied the angel. "Why Uriel?"

Michele opened his eyes. He seemed to see the room and the angel through a shimmering haze, like damp varnish. He shrugged. "I'm running out of names." He took a sip of the tepid water that sat in a cup on the bedside table, and grimaced at its brackish taste.

That afternoon, he painted the rest of the angel's body, the long shadows cast by its limbs against the wall and the floor. He added a few strokes to suggest the rough plaster of the walls. And then he stared at the painting for a long time. Now and then, he raised the brush as if to add or retouch some detail. Each time he let it fall again without touching it to the canvas.

The painting was finished. Except that it wasn't.

He continued to pace back and forth in front of the canvas, pausing now and then to study the painting or the scene before him. He couldn't say why he felt unsatisfied with the picture. It was an excellent portrait, and though he had painted it quickly and while ill, it was well executed. But it lacked something. "Something's missing," he muttered to himself.

At last, the shadows lengthened, and the long rays of sunlight from the window deepened to a bloody red. Michele threw down the brush and palette in disgust. "Enough for today."

A sudden wave of pain lanced through him, and he doubled over, knees buckling. The angel crossed the room with impossible speed and caught him before he fell. It picked him up in its arms as if he weighed nothing at all. Its skin was icy cold against his, seeming to suck all of the warmth out of him. He began to shiver uncontrollably.

The angel set him down on the bed. Slowly, he stopped shivering. When the pain faded, Michele propped himself up on one elbow. He found the angel standing with its back to him, examining the painting.

Michele coughed. "Yes, I'm fine, thank you. A momentary fit, nothing more."

"I know," replied the angel, without turning around. It gestured at the painting. "It's a fine portrait. Is it finished?"

"Nearly."

The angel looked again. "How do you know when it's finished?" It asked, at last, almost hesitantly.

Michele sighed. He was too tired, much too tired, to discuss art with an angel. "The same way I know that any painting is finished. The same way you know that anything you create is finished. It's finished when it's finished."

The angel turned to face him. "Angels don't create. We can execute the designs of our Creator, and we can destroy. But not create."

"Oh." Under other circumstances, Michele would have felt smug about being able to do something an angel could not. "I'm sorry."

The angel laughed. "Don't be. I'm not. I don't know what I'm missing. I regret it no more than you regret not being able to fly."

Michele closed his eyes. "If I could fly," he murmured. "I'd be in Rome by now."

He heard the angel laugh again, and then he was asleep.

He was in Rome, walking impossibly deserted streets lit ghostly silver by a full moon. He was heading for the Piazza Navona, but though he was never more than a few streets away, he never seemed to reach it. He wondered if they had rebuilt the whole city on a different plan in his absence, just to spite him.

He rounded a corner. Suddenly, men with swords were everywhere, stepping from doorways, from shadows. One of them threw

Continued on page 82

Lisa Snellings combines fantasy and whimsy, horror and movement to create the ultimate Gothic Disneyworld.

I
[illegible] impression that she realized it was [illegible]
[illegible] the terror of falling.
storm. I started the recording [illegible] in, made a pot of coffee, and the
Goes Round—we had to meet her

By Jane Frank

Dark

Carnival

The carousel has eight separate animal rider figures and turns on an electrical rotating base. Each miraculous creature with its own name gained rider tra ning from a stunning three-headed *Hark's Gate* to a lovely *Hanuman Hare* is reflected in the mirrored glass. The roof of the carousel is a wonderful Gothic mixture of medieval gargoyles and angels. The effect was absolutely entrancing. Lisa confessed that she had never committed so much time or energy to one sculpture before and she was nervous about "pulling it off." We, meanwhile, were worried that she'd never agree to sell it! We thumbed through her portfolio. Where had she gotten such inspiration?

There's no use in trying to untangle the psychological knots. Who can say what compels an artist to seek out and find the imagery to express the stuff of fears and shadows that raise nightmare chills? But yet her sculptures, while dark in the way of Ray Bradbury's *Dark Carnival*, are also complexly beautiful and strange. Centers, too, in the way that only the most deeply horrifying, yet magnetically powerful artistic visions can be.

Or maybe, as Gaiman says, she's just "funny and clever and haunted by the ghosts of Harlequins." That sounds right, too!

It took us a couple of hours to persuade Lisa to part with the carousel, apparently she had never planned on anyone wanting it. In shock after we agreed to her price, she allowed us to buy her lunch—where one of us (we don't remember who) voiced the idea of a grand carnival project. For each of the next 10 years Lisa would create a new piece in what would become a monumental "Dark Carnival." While each piece would stand alone as a major work of art, the works would form an integrated whole. Annually we would add a new ride or attraction to the amusement park—perhaps a roller coaster, other rides, side shows, and who knows what else—so that in the end, we

would have a magnificent single carnival. The carnival might, one day, also serve as a group of extraordinary "maquettes," should it attract the interest of those in a position to fund an actual carnival based on Lisa's ideas and characters. A Gothic Disneyworld? The ultimate in haunted house-inspired attractions!

Each piece would be a combination of wood, metals, and traditional sculpting materials. Each would integrate motion into the normally static sculptural medium. And each would incorporate Lisa's unique perspective and ability to combine dark elements of fantasy with the whimsical. And all through the years of the project, we would encourage her to follow whatever artistic paths her imagination might lead her on—from functional crafted sculptures like harlequin candlesticks, paperweights, and bookends to fine art conceptual wall friezes and cast bronze statues to commissioned illustrative paintings for books.

The second work in the Dark Carnival (but the first one commissioned by us) was delivered to us at the 1996 World Fantasy Convention in Schaumburg, Ill., and it stopped con-

"Once I made the leap from symphony to roller coaster, the whole carnival was just there."

OPPOSITE TOP: *Don't Ask Jack*. BELOW: *Short Trip to October*. RIGHT: *Crowded After Hours*. PREVIOUS SPREAD: (left) *No Refunds, No Returns*; (right) *Turns at Old Hertie's Place*.

vention-goers in their tracks! It's a spectacularly ornate and highly detailed motor-driven Ferris wheel titled *Crowded After Hours*. The wheel stands 42 inches high and 12 stations ("cars") each hosting one or a pair of unique passengers. Freaks, fantastic hybrids, and assorted grotesques make up Lisa's "Wheel Macabre." Exotic and not quite human figures, some inspired by the Tarot, others by circus side show archetypes, can be seen clinging to, or hanging from, the giant spokes of the wheel, which is made of carved mahogany and polymer resin. There is even a separate "ticket booth" containing a speaker attached to a tape player providing carnival music as the wheel turns! *Strange Attractions*, an anthology of stories published by Shadowland Press (2000) was inspired by Lisa's *Crowded After Hours* characters, and she fully illustrated each story with her own two-dimensional works. Authors such as Ray Bradbury, Harlan Ellison, Neil Gaiman, John Shirley, and Gene Wolfe found a rich source of subject matter when challenged to write a story based on the Gothic and darkly twisted figures that populate Snelling's carnival.

About once a year Lisa spends a few days at our house, assembling the latest creation and cleaning and adjusting earlier ones. We use this time to discuss the next project in line

Carnival. It was at the start of this tradition that Lisa proposed *Short Trip to October*. We loved the concept of a fantastical roller coaster. "How large?" she asked. We replied, "About the size of that couch," pointing to a two-person couch in our living room—not fully grasping the consequences of that suggestion.

The coaster features an electrical lift gravity design constructed of mixed media on a steel and wooden frame with copper tracks—and at 3 by 6 by 4 feet, we must remove hinges from all doors every time it is moved for exhibition. It has six cars with passengers with a skeleton conductor and many additional figures on and about the tracks. Bones are scattered here and there along with the remains of a violent Halloween. Strange lanterns glow and a leering huge pumpkin figure presides over the amusements. When the head car reaches the gravitational "point of no return," viewers gasp at the sudden, surprising lurching of the train as it careens wildly down the track, clattering, twisting and turning with abandon, to reach the end of the line in a matter of mesmerizing seconds.

Each year we've added another piece to the carnival. Fourth came *Aunt Ida's Nest Near Midnight* (1998) and fifth was the *Tinkter's Children*, our amazing gumball machine. *Aunt Ida* is a carnival "peep" show on a revolving base. Caged, perched figures rotate on top, partially hidden figures rotate and are glimpsed through holes in the nest, while below is a rotating "stage" with numerous figures. Under the stage, on a wooden base, are a bouncer and several "onlookers" including a few rats. *Tink's Children* is very different. It's a "punk" show consisting of a carved wood display with shelves. Each shelf contains several figures, some in jars reminiscent of the punk exhibits in carnivals of the 1930s and 1940s. ["Punk" is an old carney term, which refers to "babies" in jars of formaldehyde that were usually sadly deformed fetuses but sometimes were dead animals or fakes made from rubber. That's why some of Tink's "children" are in jars, and why the one on the bottom is getting "repaired" with spare parts.]

The sixth work to be delivered was *No Refunds, No Returns*—a ticket "seller." Lisa cheerfully made a point of saying that the reason she puts quotation marks around the word "seller" is because "he won't accept just any payment and he won't let just anyone into the carnival." He will accept payment of any object, but only as long as it is very valuable to the person seeking entry. He is a powerful authority in the carnival, like the ringmaster—hence the tuxedo and top hat. Much like

the bouncer at an exclusive club: he gets to choose who goes in but this club is for keeps! You go in, you don't come out—or at least you don't come out the same person you were when you went in. It's *No Refunds, No Returns*.

The first time we saw this piece was when Lisa installed it at another World Science Fiction Convention special show in Philadelphia, 2001. Lisa got special billing in this show and produced a poster advertising the exhibit. The ticket "seller" was a smashing success which, at the push of a button, dispensed hundreds of tickets to eager folks wanting to view an exhibit that now occupied triple the space of the earlier public display.

By the end of the convention, Lisa was both exhilarated and exhausted. "People are always asking me about the Dark Carnival, and the characters that make up my Dark Caravan series," and typically it happens like this. "A visitor walks through the exhibit for a while, hands in pockets, going from sculpture to sculpture. He leans in to peer at some detail that catches his eye. Having discovered this tucked-away figure or bit of humor, he looks for more and finds they're everywhere. This may go on for 10 minutes or an hour. He's fascinated, sort of, and disturbed, sort of. He may begin to enlist those around him, pointing here and there. Eventually, without fail, he will stop suddenly, make a beeline to me and demand to know, *where this stuff comes from*."

(continued on page 70)

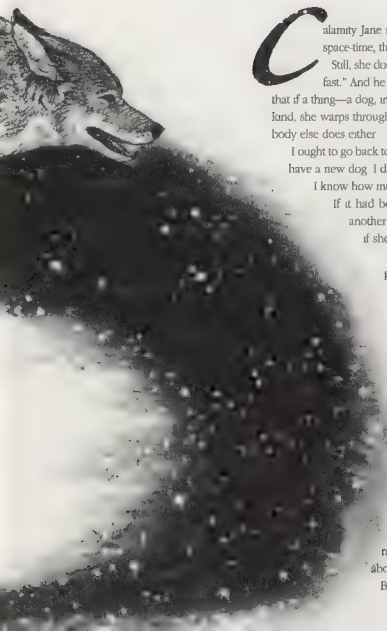
FAR LEFT: *Hale's Children*. LEFT: *Aunt Ida*. ABOVE: *This Wheel Too, Goes Round*. BELOW: *Midway Between Grace and Clarity*.

Ca

Mostly Gene Wolfe writes of weighty matters—the death of empires and the fate of the earth. This one's about a dog. But in its own way, it may well concern the death of empires and the fate of the earth.

Calamity Warps

By Gene Wolfe
Illustration By Laurie Harden



Calamity Jane is our dog, and she warps through space. I suppose I should say space-time, though that implies a level of expertise I haven't actually got.

Still, she does. I told Bob Smith next door and he said, "Yep, she's really, really fast." And he may be right. Maybe that's all it is. Maybe the laws of physics say that if a thing—a dog, in this case—moves a whole lot faster than other things of the same kind, she warps through space. I don't know, and to tell you the truth, I don't think anybody else does either.

I ought to go back to the beginning. Our old dog died, and my wife decided we should have a new dog. I didn't think so. It wasn't that I don't like dogs. I do. It was just that I know how much trouble they can be and how much responsibility is involved. If it had been up to me, I would have contacted the breeder and gotten another Cairn Terrier. But I told my wife I didn't think we ought to, and if she really wanted a dog she would have to get it herself.

So she did. Being on the frugal side, she went to Save-A-Pet and got one for the price of the shots. That was Calamity Jane, who had been spayed and was housebroken, and that was all we really knew about her. The people at Save-A-Pet think she's about eighteen months old.

My wife has various ideas about what kind of dog she might be, some kind of Belgian shepherd one day, and half this and half that the next. What's for sure is that if you dropped her in a pack of coyotes the coyotes would roll out the welcome mat, and brag afterward about their new member. She's the color of sand, her legs are so long it looks like she's walking on stilts, and she has big, stiff, wolf ears. She also has a long, long muzzle with teeth. Lots of them, and the big ones are really, really big. She knows who got her from Save-A-Pet and is my wife's dog. She tolerates me except for late at night. Late at night she thinks I'm sneaking up with some villainous purpose in mind, like giving her a rabies shot, and she lets me know there's no guarantee I'll always have two arms. Boy, I hope she's wrong about that.

Because she warps, like I said.

At first I thought she was just fast. Like, she'd be out in the backyard, and I'd go to the gate, and when my hand touched the latch she'd be right beside me—without ever having gotten there. If you know what I mean.

Then there was the rabbit. We're pretty far out in the 'burbs, and we get deer and coons and whatnot now and then. It's kind of nice, but the deer will eat your rose bushes unless Calamity's around.

So here was this big cottontail, and the first thing I knew Calamity wasn't in the backyard anymore. She was out in the street after that rabbit. Her legs are really, really long, like I told you, and she just flew.

But the rabbit could turn quicker. She would be snapping at its hind feet and it would make a hard right or a hard left and she'd overshoot it. She'd turn, of course, but the rabbit would have gotten a couple of yards. (I mean like Dawson's yard or Smith's.) When she caught up again, the rabbit would make another hard turn.

Then it did, but she didn't overshoot. Or turn, either. They had been running straight downhill toward Hillside Drive, and the rabbit made a sharp right toward the house on the corner. And Calamity was running that way, too. It wasn't that she had turned, she still had all her momentum, just a sandstorm. The rabbit turned again, and she was right on top of it and bit it in the neck.

She brought it to me after shaking it pretty good, and dropped it at my feet. Then she sort of stepped back and said, *I know you don't like me much, but look what I can do.* Right there's where I made my second big mistake. (My first one was not getting a Cairn Terrier.) I should have said bad dog and all that, but I picked up the rabbit and said thank you, good dog, and a lot more. What would you have done? Would you want a dog like Calamity mad at you?

Afterward I asked my wife why she'd named her Calamity Jane, and she said she hadn't, the people at Save-A-Pet had. That's when I called them up. And the woman I talked to said they called her that because she was always getting into things and getting out of her run and showing up in places where she shouldn't have been.

I'll bet. I think they knew. They just didn't want to tell us.

There's no way I can make you believe it, so I'll just tell it. She brought home a shadow.

So that was that, and I tried chaining her up, but that didn't work either. I think it really made things worse, because she got into the habit, if you know what I mean. She'd see another dog or something, and run to the end of her chain and be with that other dog. And her collar would be lying on the ground with the chain still on it. So I quit doing it.

Then she started bringing stuff home, and she would give it to me. Mostly it was stuff she could have gotten anywhere, but once it was a wallet with Japanese money in it and a Japanese ID. I sent that to the Japanese consulate.

The next I remember was just a stick. Only it was heavy, and the harder you looked at it, the funnier it looked, if you know what I mean. The bark was kind of like skin, and warty, and the wood inside wasn't really bone, but it made you think of that. Polished bone, and that hard and heavy.

After that a little animal, still alive. It was sort of cute, but Calamity had hurt it pretty bad catching it, and it had trouble breathing. It had pink fur. I read one time that they used to take white rabbits and dye them all sorts of colors for Easter and sell them for pets, and I thought maybe it had been dyed like that. But it looked really strange, and after it was dead and couldn't bite I took it down in the basement and cut into it.

I took biology in high school, and it was about the only time in my life I ever got a B. But I had been good at that, and we had cut up dead frogs and studied the heart, the stomach, and so forth, and I thought I would just have a look inside that little pink animal. So I had it on my workbench down there and put a new blade in my utility knife, and opened it up.

You talk about a shock. It wasn't a vertebrate. It had fur—that pink fur—but it didn't have a backbone. Maybe there's something on this planet that has fur but no backbone, but I don't know what it is. Even fish are vertebrates, and so are birds. Its blood was pink, too. So right then I was starting to get an inkling of what was going on.

Only I didn't know where Calamity was going to get this stuff. I thought Mars, so I read up on Mars and it could be there were little pink animals there, but the stick didn't fit, and neither did some of the other stuff.

After that came the real mindblower. There's no way I can make you believe it, so I'll just tell it. She brought home a shadow.

I don't mean her own shadow. I mean another shadow that she carried in her mouth and dropped at my feet. Of course it tried to stick onto me then. I jumped away and kicked at it, and for a while it was off by itself.

If you shine a light on it, it sort of disappears, and if there are a bunch of lights all around, like in the living room with all the lights on, you can't see it very good at all. But if you take it outside late in the day, when the sun's pretty low, you can see it really well. It's the shadow of a big man with wide shoulders and four arms. He's got on a helmet with horns on it, too, or that's what it looks like—the kind of thing you see in pictures of Vikings.

It would try to stick to me, and I'd get rid of it by jumping and kicking, and at first that worked pretty well. Or I thought it did. And I would try to get rid of it by losing it or shining lights on it, which didn't work at all.

Then I noticed I didn't have my regular shadow anymore. I could stand right beside my wife in the sunshine, and she'd have a shadow, and you could see the shadow of the birdbath or whatever as plain as day. But not mine. You couldn't see my shadow at all. So I thought, pretty soon somebody's going to notice this.

And I let the shadow Calamity had brought stick to my feet the way it wanted. Now I can't get rid of it when I try, and it's a man a lot bigger than I am, with horns and four arms.

Which is fine if we're standing in high grass or something that breaks the shadow up. I look perfectly normal then. But if we're on concrete, like the driveway, and the sun is low and bright. Well, you can imagine.

A lucky thing is that I work in an office where there are a lot of bright fluorescent lights up in the ceiling. Nobody notices. But the other thing is that we've got these emergency lights that come on if the power fails. That happened about two years ago, and they were really bright. Everybody was casting hard, sharp shadows. If it ever happens again, I'm going to hide under my desk until everybody else has left.

So that's pretty bad. But what really worries me is this new thing Calamity's given me. It's not exactly like a sword, and it's not exactly like an axe, and there's little dashes of other stuff in there, too, maybe a baseball bat with a big nail through it and a machine gun. Stuff like that. If you saw it, you'd say what's that!

You're supposed to hold it with two hands. Or maybe three. It's hard to tell. It's pretty, too.

Now, let me be up front here. Mrs. Smith's an art teacher and I showed it to her yesterday. It was a cloudy day and she was weeding her annuals. I just carried it over and said, "Have a look at this."

She said, "My God, how ugly!" Then, "No. No ... Yes, it is. It's terribly ugly, but it's beautiful, isn't it? It's too beautiful to be bothered with looking pretty. Can I hold it?"

So I gave it to her, and she almost dropped it, it was so heavy. Only it doesn't feel heavy to me. It feels about like a broom handle. I guess it feels like that to Calamity, too. But I set the sharp end on the bathroom scale and sort of balanced it, and the scale said thirty seven pounds.

The funny thing is that when I hold it, my shadow holds it, pretty much the same as me. I can pick up a book or my attaché case and my shadow doesn't have it. But when I pick up the sword or whatever it is, it does. Sometimes with three hands.

Now it's started talking to me at night. Is that what they call runes? It whispers, late at night when I'm in bed, and that's why I'm telling you this now. ❧

EOS..

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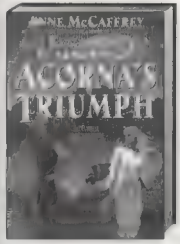

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By Eric T. Baker

Wizards of the Coast provides all you'll ever need to know about dragons.

The ***Draconomicon*** is Wizards of the Coast's lavishly illustrated, everything you-ever wanted-to-know-about-dragons supplement for its *Dungeons & Dragons* line. The wonder is that the book was such a long time in coming. Considering the name of the game, it would seem that the company should have put out this book years ago.

The book is 288 glossy pages and presented in a sensible typeface; the book seems packed but legible. The inside cover displays head shots of the five types of metal dragons and the five types of chromatic ones. Although the drawings are in black and white, the artist has clearly differentiated the ten types. The first chapter differentiates them even more by size, life span, bone structure, habits and habitats, spells, claws, tails, and breath. The chapter lays out the whole of the dragons and their lives.

Chapter 2 adds more: The mechanics of the dragons' weapons and powers and how the Dungeon Master can use them in a campaign. The pièce de résistance? Prestige classes for dragons.

Chapter 3 looks at dragons from the player side and, among lots of other information (including dragon-related artifacts and items), contains prestige classes for the player races, some of whom hunt dragons, some of whom protect them, and some of whom poach from them. Chapter 4 is a bestiary of dragon-related monsters, and the book finishes up with a bevy of sample dragons, statted up and given backgrounds and hordes. This is a great supplement.

The Player's Guide to Low Clans, a supplement from White Wolf for their *Dark Ages· Vampire* line, is not a book of new vampire clans. Instead, it is an amplification of the roles of the Assamites, Setites, Gangrel, Malkavians, Nosferatu, Ravanos, and Tremere during the times of the *Dark Ages* setting. In that era, the other vampire clans had made it a point to back, control, and become the nobles in the European realms. The clans dealt with in this book had, for one reason or another, aligned themselves with the common people, alienated themselves from all society, or engaged in pagan religions. In the class-conscious world of the setting, this made them low, if incredibly powerful, people.

The Howling Dragon from the windswept plain of Pandemonium is but one of the creatures described in Draconomicon

This supplement lays out how do something that is very hard for role-players to do: Be the underdog. If role-playing is escapism, why escape into being a mere peasant? Or less? Taking the lowest place in society is even harder when the powers of the undead are the player's to command.

The supplement describes how it is OK for characters to chaff at their ordained role in the world—that there is heroism to be found in even the lowest places. The writers suggest *Braveheart* and *Gangs of New York* as source material for the campaigns that spring from this book. Both movies show that even among the lower strata there are grades and classes and rules and ways—and always the smoldering looking for a spark. They also demonstrate the dangers of putting a spark to the keg, the high classes always stand ready to fight for keeping their place.

Not as lavishly illustrated and full of lots of history that may not fit every campaign, *PGLC* contains the necessary amount of characters, mood, and advice.

Lavish is not a word that applies to ***Viking Age***, a supplement for the d20 System from Avalanche Press. It has a stock cheesecake cover, but the interior of the book is 99 percent text and charts. Also missing are diagrams and maps. The reason these missing items are worth bringing up is that Ad is trying to evoke for the GM and his players the alien world of ad 700 to 900. Words can

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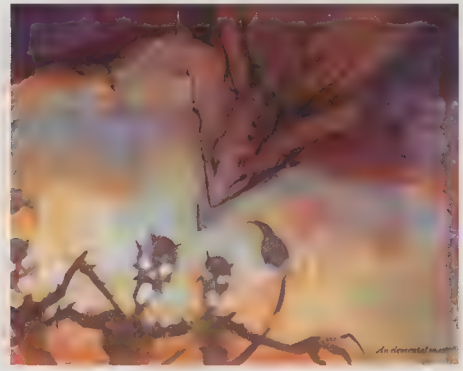


only go so far in doing that

The words in *VA*, on the other hand, are superb The book is built on the bones of three previous supplements for Viking role-playing, and then expanded and fleshed out The result is a complete and detailed guide to what that historical world was like and how to integrate the legendary monsters those people told tales of into a campaign set there

The topics covered in *VA* run the gamut from the history of the gods through the history of the Vikings to a bestiary of real and mythic creatures It covers the Vikings at war, at sex, and at play. It gives guidelines for running characters through a campaign whether they are human or divine. Given the wealth of data this book could have used an index but it is still worth having for groups interested in playing the era

Although White Wolf has stopped adding books to the pen and dice version of their *Hunter* series, the video game version is alive and well ***Hunter the Reckoning: Redeemer*** is the third installment in the series, the second for the Xbox. In the first *Hunter* video game, young Kaylie Winter watched her parents die at the claws of her demonically transformed teddy bear *Redeemer* opens ten years later when Kaylie has returned to the cursed town of Ashcroft with her foster father, the priest Esteban Cortez. They are joined by the other three hunters from the other games, and once again set out to put the dead back in the ground. Only this time they have to fight off a pack of Werewolves as well

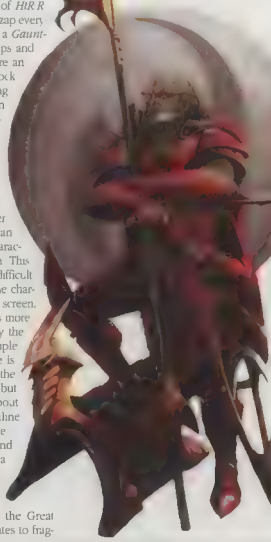
While the game play has changed a little (it is now easier to increase the Hunters skills and powers), the formula of *HtR R* remains the same shoot, hack, or zap everything that moves It is very much a *Gauntlet*-style game, there are power-ups and objects to be found, and there are an endless number of monsters to block the players' characters from finding them. The only time the action slows down is between levels where players are given a chance to catch their breath and rest their trigger fingers

While *HtR R* is enjoyable as a single-player game, it is at its best as a multiplayer one Up to four people can play at once and all the characters are on the same screen This can make moving around difficult since the game forces all the characters to stay on the screen. but this annoyance is more than made up for by the mayhem that multiple hunters inflict There is enough story to hold the action together, but *HtR R* is really all about the pure of adrenaline high of constant battle

Another paper and dice game that's been made into a very good video game is ***Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge.*** Set in an alternate-history America where the events of WWI and the Great Depression caused the United States to fragment and the great railroads to be destroyed, *CS* follows the adventures of Nathan Zachary Zachary is a scoundrel whose profession is sky pirate, one of the desperate men and women who make their livings smuggling and robbing among the Zeppelins that now carry the continent's cargo

The game is set in the late 1930s and the planes mostly have the biplane dogfight feel of a WWI game What is great about *CS* is that the cool aerial maneuvers are not only available at the beginning of the game, but are also very easy to use *CS* may in fact be the most forgiving dog- fighting game ever made The controls are easy to use and the other planes fly slowly enough that battles are not just zooming past planes then turning around and zooming past them again Players can actually get on another plane's tail and stay there

In addition to the dogfights, there are also missions where Nathan mans the deck guns of Zeppelins, steals other people's planes, and runs races through weirdly positioned gates. Some well-animated cut scenes fill in the details of Nathan's career And there is also a multiplayer game for up to four players. Each of the game's settings is well laid out with lots of opportunities for daring



canyon flying. The retro-futuristic Chicago is particularly cool. While not for fans of flying that is just like the real thing, *Crimson Skies* is a very enjoyable game.

The ***Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*** game for the Playstation 2, on the other hand, is not very enjoyable. The plot follows the movie, the player controls each of the four main characters in turn, and some good scenes from the movie are inserted between the levels, but that is all the game has to recommend it.

The problems start when the game does. After the initial cut scene, there is no tutorial "level." The game simply dumps the character into the "stealing of Green Destiny" scene. There is no explanation of the controls and no objective given. Instead of the wild roof chase of the movie, the initial battle takes place in a large, drab palace courtyard that the characters are not allowed to leave until they defeat a pile of hapless guards. The game's levels don't improve as the game goes on.

There are so many other fighting and adventure games on the market that it is hard to recommend this one. Players wanting great kung fu can find it done better in games like *Soul Calibur II*. Players looking for adventure and wuxia action will enjoy it more in games like *Prince of Persia: CT/HD* is only for hardcore fans of the movie, and even they may be disappointed. ❧

king's snow

Continued from page 47

and Offered. Hear me Tunon. As Suz wills, I demand you come forth."

The wind stopped.

The young man stared at the back of the stranger's head as he followed him through the streets. There is little time to waste with this foolishness, he thought, the hogs won't feed themselves. The stranger was shorter than him by a head and his body was thin and frail. He could not be who he claimed to be. He was sickly.

"What did you say your name was?" Perhaps he could catch the man in a lie.

"Hodgett," the stranger replied, glancing back over his shoulder, but never breaking stride. "Cerok's Witness."

"Cerok. Offered himself twenty years ago. My mother told me his Witness was young, no more than my age now. Pardon me, but you look as if you could be a hundred. You're quite old to be Hodgett himself."

The stranger seemed unaffected by his disbelief. He slowed his pace to match that of the young man and regarded him with large, wet eyes. "Time takes a greater toll on me than on some, but I *am* Hodgett. I knew your name didn't I, Will?"

"So does everyone in the village."

"True." He lowered his eyes to the ground. "Please, just come along."

Will heaved a sigh of resignation and walked with the stranger into the town square. There stood the familiar statue of Jason, and at its side, the more recently constructed statue of Cerok. Will saw his own nose and eyes on the statue, but otherwise he did not recognize the figure. The stranger passed the statue of Jason and stopped at the feet of Cerok. He ran his slender fingers across the etched lettering on the statue's base then read aloud. "Cerok the Father, Second Daggerbearer of Hunting Square."

Will watched the stranger as he took the measure of the statue. "A fair likeness. Perhaps a bit overlarge."

"Sir, if you don't mind, can you tell me what I'm here for. I have a great deal of work to do."

It was as if Will had not spoken. The stranger continued to stare at the statue with his mouth slightly open. After a time, he spoke again. "I gave him that name, you know."

Will was confused. "Cerok was always his name."

An amused expression crept over the stranger's face as he turned from the statue and walked toward Will. "I mean the other part. The Father. A good name, don't you think?"

"It's what *I'd* call him," said Will with a touch of sarcasm. The stranger responded with a hearty laugh.

"Look," said Will, "as I've told you, I haven't much time. Can you please tell me what you want?"

"I don't want anything save to tell you that your father was a good man. He did his duty. He defeated the Tunon, killed himself with the King's Dagger, and allowed us all to go on with our lives."

Yes, so I've been told. Everyone knows what kind of sacrifice Daggerbearers make. The fact that we aren't covered in snow and that the King lives on healthy and fat is testament enough to the fact that he did his job.

"How much do you know of your father?"

"As much as anyone does."

The stranger's eyes looked tired and he lost his smile. "That is what he feared. You remember the legend but not your father. He asked me to tell you of him and now that I'm here, I realize that I don't know him myself."

Will became furious. "So you admit it. You aren't the Witness. I don't have any more patience for crazy old men." He turned and started away but a hand on his shoulder stopped him. The grip was firmer than he could have imagined and the old man spun him around to face him again.

"I *did* know your father, as hard as it may be for you to accept. It's just that I don't know what to say. You don't learn much about a person in such a short time." His grip relaxed and his shoulders slumped. It was as if the exertion of stopping Will from leaving had sapped every ounce of his remaining strength. Will's mood softened and he looked down at the man with pity.

"I can at least tell you this," said the stranger. His face was not smiling but his eyes were filled with a weary contentment. "He did this for you. His last concern prior to facing his fate was you. Your opinion of him."

Will decided that the man was delusional but intended no ill will. There could be no harm in humoring him. "I thank you, Hodgett. You have delivered your tidings and kept your word. I wish you a good journey."

The stranger smiled and for a moment it seemed to take years off his appearance. "I see that you still don't believe me, but as you say, I've delivered my tidings. Good life to you." Without further comment he made his way to the edge of the square before stopping and turning to face Will one last time. He pulled something from a shallow pocket on his vest and tossed it in Will's direction. "Something for you to play with," he said, just as Will caught the object, and his smiling face disappeared around the corner.

Will opened his hand and gazed in shock at what he held. Indeed, it was true then. The old man was who he claimed to be. He dropped the object in his pants pocket and heard it clink against the coin he had carried with him since the age of two. They were identical, not local currency, but minted somewhere far away. The coin given to him so long ago and the coin tossed his way today were the only two of their kind he had ever seen. He turned toward the statue of his father and gazed upon it with new eyes. ❧

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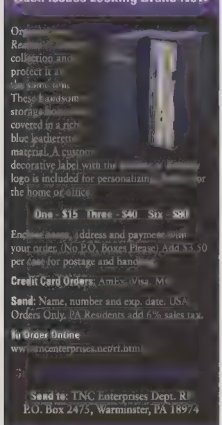
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in a tower high

Continued from page 34

The fairy godmother did what she could to lessen the curse, but there's only so much a teacher can do.

Sleeping Beauty's desk faces away from the window. Behind her, a wide expanse of glass gives her a view of the city greatly prized by real estate agents. She never turns around, though. When Sleeping Beauty first started working in the high-rise, she used to stand near the window and look out. From this high up, it's impossible to see the people in the streets, all you see is a forest of buildings. Now, the only window she stares at is the window on her desk.

The routine is mind-numbing, but that doesn't really matter, since she's asleep.

Prince Charming has arrived at the base of the tower. He's having a bit of trouble. He's not wearing a suit and he doesn't carry a cell phone. Or a beeper. Prince Charming doesn't have an appointment. The secretary in the front lobby is not amused. She's eying the button that will call security and the roses on her desk are making him sniffle.

Wasn't he supposed to just waltz right through the barriers?

Back in Kansas, the fairy godmother is feeling nervous. She picks up her super-deluxe digital fairy godmother cell phone (don't try to find one of these at your local electronics store) and punches the number four. The phone on the secretary's desk in the lobby begins to ring. The fairy godmother knows all the right buzzwords. Prince Charming gets a temporary security badge.

Hey, this beats swinging a heavy sword any day.

Sleeping Beauty looks up when Prince Charming walks into her office. He looks vaguely familiar, but no one *she* knows would be seen dead dressed like that. She frowns at him and asks how she can help him.

What she really means is how can she make him go away. Fast.

Prince Charming really pours on the charm. He reminds Sleeping Beauty of all the good times they used to have together. Of how they used to laugh and do crazy things and put down all the brown-nosers back in high school. Sleeping Beauty wrinkles her own carefully powdered nose at this crass language. When Prince Charming tries to kiss her she leans away, out of his reach, and tells him to leave.

Her job evaluation is going to be in the pits if anyone figures out she used to date this creep.

Prince Charming knows when he's defeated. He shrugs and backs off. "Hey, no offense." It doesn't take long before he's handed his badge back in and hopped on his Harley. Things wouldn't have worked out for them anyway, they'd grown in different directions.

After all, this isn't a fairy tale. ❧

israbel

Continued from page 41

Colas found him the next evening. Plinta lay stiff and marble cold, and looking bloodless as marble, there on the studio rug splashed by the dregs of a sunset.

Colas gave a yowl. Howling and yelping like a wolf, he rolled Plinta about the floor, and when neighbors rushed up the stairs, wailed that Plinta had died, was dead, and now Colas would be slung out on the street—Colas's only actual concern.

"No, you dolt. Look, he's waking up. *Dead? Plinta?* Only drunk—"

Plinta woke. He stretched, and Colas, who genuinely had seen him minutes before dead as the deadest corpse, backed away gibbering.

But Plinta himself felt wonderful like a prince who is in love and has, besides, dined on a banquet. He threw a boot at Colas, and Colas, at last reassured his patron was the same as ever, tramped off to fetch the coffee.

Already the marvellous dream—of the Cathedral, the gargoyles, the vampire, and her attentions—was fading. Of the dream-within the dream did anything remain? Maybe not. But Plinta soon noticed Israbel had taken her portrait away with her. Why not, when she had bought it, and at an excellent price. Next time he saw it, the picture, he would be again with her.

One last splinter of dream-memory did linger, however. He had asked her where he should meet her, Israbel his sister, *now*, in blood. But he had been stupid to ask, for Plinta had not needed to. Tonight, as much of Paris knew, Israbel was due to act and sing her glimmering five minutes at the *Opéra*.

Plinta threw his mirror into the cupboard before he left the studio. Now a vampire, he could never again see himself reflected, and had duly proved as much with one or two contemptuous glares at the glass. Others, though, *would* see him in mirrors and not suspect, just as Israbel had explained.

Would she be glad, at last, of his company? They were brethren, and she had admitted, she had discovered no kindred, just as never again had she located the supernatural cat.

Two moods possessed Plinta as he walked the glacial streets of Paris, moving toward the golden ornament of the theater. One was an elation not unmixed with eager fear. The other was a deep melancholy, a sort of shadow. The first state he comprehended. The second puzzled him. Was he in mourning then for his purely *human* life now ended? What did that matter? Nothing, not at all. But no, it was not that.

He stood in the light-spiked dark, and thought, *Perhaps immortality is only formed, for us, from those countless days*

we may never now experience A life of nights, doubled

All things are paid for. Even Israbel had paid for the painting he had made of her.

Plinta took a box at the theater, a rare extravagance. He soon glimpsed Dumière across the auditorium in a box of his own, with other friends. Dumière saluted Plinta, pleased to see him at a distance. But how jealous Dumière would be, if only he knew Had he offered Israbel marriage? Israbel and Plinta *were* married, in more than religion or legality.

One flesh—

Where shall I feed? Plinta thought, as the curtain rose on some spectacular unimpor tance *She will show me She will be my teacher.* Then he sat back, watching the acts of the play through half-closed eyes, and all about the theater rustled and murmured, whistled and called, silenly alive. He imagined it was like being in the zoological gardens. He had never felt a part of them, the human race, and now was not.

To GREAT CLAPPING AND CALLS, ISRABEL CAME OUT in the fifth act, as the program stipulated, to perform her part and sing her aria, which that night was by Rameau

Plinta sat forward. His eyes widened His heart, or some more profound mechanism, slammed high into his chest, then leapt away, down into a chasm. Tears rolled, helpless to save themselves, from his eyes.

If he had been able, in those minutes, like the Biblical Samson, he would have risen, grabbed vast pillars of the *Opèra* temple, and brought it crashing down

Samson had lost all Plinta too, had lost

Now he could never know, he who must learn *everything*—whether or not he had loved her instead he would be, like the rest of his kind, bereft, and quite unique.

On the stage Israbel sang, and the audience hung in wild suspense until the last note, then bellowed its applause and flung its flowers And across the theater, Dumière sprang up and raced, fever flushed from his box, to seek her in the dressing rooms

But Plinta stayed where he was, still as when Colas had found him and thought him, rightly, dead. Only the mobile tears ran on from Plinta's eyes.

For she had warned him, had she not? Even his mirror in its own cruelly amusing way, had done so. Certainly his inner dream of facelessness. No vampire could see itself in reflection—only human things could see it there. But that was not *only* in mirrors. No vampire could see *any* vampire—themselves or another either in a mirror, or any where in the whole crystal globe of the heartless, lonely, reflective world. On the stage, Israbel was taking her bow. Plinta alone did not applaud. To him she was now entirely inaudible and invisible, just as he was now entirely inaudible and invisible to Israbel, and to all their kind.

carnival

Continued from page 69

Conception remains a unique experience for Lisa. An idea comes from some experience, past or present, and she finds some way to visually represent it. The metaphor, the twists, and the play within the title develop gradually as she works. "Angels, death, madness, and isolation are ongoing themes, while Harlequins, demons,and rats hugh together at it all and ignorant humanity is sandwiched between " Neil Gaiman, who spotted her talents as early as we, and would become one of her strongest champions and co-creator on artistic projects, puts it this way. "There's a statue of a jester and an angel I bought from her because I suspected that it was a frozen story, and I didn't want someone else having it . [and] what I like about Lisa's artwork is that she makes stones Her creations don't just exist frozen only in the moment you see them—we are privileged to glimpse them frozen, but their stones began long long ago, and will continue after we are gone."

During the Millennium Worldcon Convention in Philadelphia Lisa also showed us drawings for the next piece. *Turns at Cold Heaven Park.* This is a flying swing ride with 12 swings and over 50 figures, including about three dozen rats and crows and several hundred tiny red roses. And, as was the case for previous additions to the carnival, we saw it for the first time in person at another convention, ConJose, the 60th World Science Fiction Convention, held in San Jose, Calif., 2002. It is another *coup*—another great contribution to the Dark Carnival. The most recent addition, arriving just in time for the World Fantasy Convention in Washington, DC, this year, is *Midway Between Grace and Chance* It's 45 inches high (55" inches including the top figures, which are detachable for shipping), 28 inches deep, and 50 inches wide Filled with gadgets, swatches, bells, and whistles, this is a three-section, fully interactive piece, as Lisa says, "a sculpture that people gather around . Ahhs and oohs and laughter, yes, but what I'm going for is—"How does it do that?" and "Where did that come from?" It will have the look of an antique toy from a very strange universe—or for very strange children, not to mention any names." (We wonder who she means?)

When we initiated the *Dark Carnival* project, we had no real concept of how gratifying the process would be. While Lisa is the artist, we also feel like we are part of the creation, because without us, it would not exist Each piece is a fine work of art in its own right. But, taken together, we believe the carnival is a great work and possibly even a masterpiece of fantasy sculpture. One more year and the project will be complete. It will be sad for us to see it end. But the joy of its creation will continue for at least a little while longer We look forward with great anticipation!

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tao of flynn

Continued from page 57

Cooper went to the board. The grid for the month had a row for each man, and Bob was on the top row. I'd been on the top row two days ago.

Slowly, Cooper wrote in Fat Bob's totals. Bob had pulled 10K on the first day of May.

The new guys gasped. Some of the old guys gasped. Caroline squeezed my hand. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"OK, then," Cooper said. "Rich, would you put up your totals, please?

I let go of Caroline, picked up my jacket, slipped it on, smoothed it out, and folded my hanger. I savored every second of Cooper's gloat and anger at my bandstanding.

At the front of the room, I took the pen. Then, I turned to the room. "Yesterday morning, we set our monthly goals," I said. "I want to thank Mr. Cooper for working me, for building me up, for supporting me so that I would set my goals higher and higher every month." I paused to take in Bob and Cooper and their puzzled expressions. "I've tried hard to live up to Mr. Cooper's expectations and trust. He's taught me a lot about trust."

Bob smiled. Cooper frowned hard, pretending to be gracious.

"I want to apologize to Mr. Cooper publicly," I said.

He walked up behind me and put a hand on my shoulder.

"It's OK, Rich. You can't hit me—"

"I set my numbers too low, and I know he had hoped for more from me."

He stepped back, and I put up the totals for the six women from the Vermeer Valley Estates Book Club.

The new men were up and screaming. They saw new houses, boats, cars, and trips to the hell out of Idaho. The old hands were quiet. They saw Cooper and Bob and me and knew someone's days were numbered. If they could have, they would have snuck out to weather the storm. I saw Flynn putting on his jacket. He had never moved so slowly, so deliberately, before. I saw a storm that promised to be wonderful.

"I want to see the paper," Bob demanded. "Nobody can sell six-million-dollar policies in one day. It takes fucking weeks to develop just one."

"I'd like to see the paper too, Rich," Cooper said. "Not that I don't trust you, but that's a pretty big number to not get into bookkeeping right away."

I pulled the paper out of my jacket and handed it over.

Cooper flipped through each policy.

When he looked up, I knew Bob was about to lose his job.

When Flynn stepped up on the stage, I wasn't sure what else was going to happen.

"Mr. Cooper," Flynn said, "I'd like to add my totals, if that's all right."

Cooper was about a beat short of dying of joy, and he grinned at Flynn. That grin said, "You taught him how to do this. I know you did. I'm grateful. Don't you think I'm not grateful, you egocentric fop."

Flynn pulled one policy from his jacket. The signature line flashed by, and I caught the name Gill before the papers were in Cooper's hands.

Flynn took the whiteboard pen and wrote seventy five million up on the board.

Cooper sat down in a chair in the front row and held his bald head in his hands.

The room was emptied of air again. I thought I smelled ozone.

"Mr. Cooper." Flynn's voice was soft, but it filled the room with the roll and rumble of summer thunder, the kind of thunder you hear when storms come over the mountains, when torrents pour down and wash away all the smog grime and desert dust from the streets, the kind of storm that leaves everything smelling new and clean. "I'd like you to meet someone, Mr. Cooper."

Gill Anderson, gray double-knits and polo shirt, walked in. He'd traded his golf shoes for deck shoes that looked all wrong. In fact, without his golf shoes, he kinda walked like a sailor fresh on land. But he was still a bull's bull, and Bob got the hell out of his way.

Behind Gill, a man in a jet black suit followed along. The man was thin, his face leathery from sun and wind. If not for the suit, I would have figured him for a ranch hand or a rail handler in a steel mill.

"Mr. Cooper?" Gill asked.

Cooper looked up.

"I'm Gill Anderson. As of midnight last night, I own your parent corporation. As of ten this morning, you own your car, and I think I have the note on that too."

Cooper's elation drained from his face along with his blood. The paper Flynn had written fell to the ground.

"Bullshit," he managed.

I think I could hear Caroline's heartbeat from the back of the room.

The rail stepped forward and opened his briefcase.

Flynn took my arm and pulled me away.

"... free of all rights and responsibilities related to, pertaining to, and resulting from your position ..." The rail was reading legalese to Cooper. Bob had disappeared.

Alone in the hallway, Flynn winked at me.

"You screwed them good, Flynn," I said.

"We gave Cooper what he said he wanted. High totals and freedom."

"What's your truth, Flynn?" I asked.

"I'm a professional liar," he said. "Do you have change for a twenty?"

I nodded.

"Give it to me, will you?"

I did.

Caroline came up beside me and put her arm around my waist.

Flynn smiled, winked, and walked away. ❧

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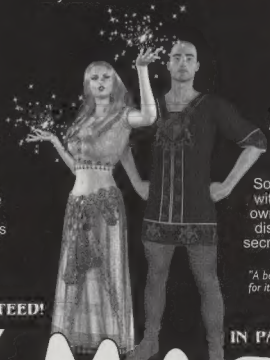

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angel

Continued from page 63

back the hood of his cloak—it was Ranuccio. He and the others closed in around Michele, surrounding him silently. He drew his own weapon. It came free of the scabbard too quickly, and as he struck out at Ranuccio, he saw that he was holding only a paintbrush.

He left a long streak of white paint on Ranuccio's dark cloak, then turned and ran straight into the path of another man, who skewered him neatly with a thrust to the gut.

He collapsed into the doorway of a building, which some tiny part of his mind that was not consumed with pain recognized as the Cerriglio. *But that's in Naples*, he thought blearily. *And they're going to ask me to stop coming back if I keep getting killed on their doorstep.*

He scrabbled for his dagger as two cloaked attackers—where had the others gone?—approached. But as they reached the doorway, they threw down their swords. Their black cloaks transformed into the white wings of angels, and they embraced each other and spiraled up into the sky.

And then he woke to the stifling heat of the hospital room at midday, miles from Rome. He clutched at his stomach, wondering why he still felt as though he'd been stuck through with a sword even though he was awake. Trembling, he lifted a hand from his damp shirt, surprised and relieved to find that it was slick with sweat and not blood.

He closed his eyes, seeing again the image of the two assassins who grew wings and became angels.

And then he knew who the angel was.

"Shit," he heard himself whisper. "How am I going to get out of this one?"

He levered himself painfully out of bed and staggered to the small pile of things by the wall—his sword and the rest of his clothes. It was all he owned in the world now. He picked up the sword and fastened the scabbard's hanger to his belt. His fingers shook, and it took him several tries to get the fastenings right. The sword felt terribly heavy, but he wasn't about to go anywhere without it.

He probably wasn't about to go anywhere at all, he admitted. How far could he possibly get? And where would he go? To Rome? Could Cardinal Borghese protect him from an angel?

But getting out of town when trouble threatened was an old instinct by now, running deeper than rationality. He pulled on his boots, set his hand on the hilt of his sword, and set off.

He made it as far as the doorway before he fainted.

"Are you comfortable down there?" The angel's voice was strangely soothing, even now.

Michele groaned and rolled over. "No." He was lying in the doorway; the angel was standing at his feet. He could see the canvas set up beyond it.

The angel held out a hand. Michele ignored it and hauled himself to his feet by gripping the door frame. He crossed to the bed quickly and sat down. He put his head in his hands.

He could feel the angel's patient, intent gaze on him. He looked up, gestured at the painting. "What would you do if I refused to finish it?"

The angel cocked its head at him. Once again, if it noticed his agitation, it seemed to regard it only as an interesting variation in behavior, to be observed the same way as everything else. "Nothing," it said.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing differently than I would if you finish it."

Michele sighed. "It wouldn't be that easy, would it?" He drew his dagger and held it loosely in one hand. He thought about that same dagger passing bloodlessly through the palm of the angel's hand. The dagger's shining blade reflected a small distorted sliver of his face. He turned it back and forth, studying his reflected image.

Abruptly, he tossed the dagger away. "All right. Let's finish it."

He quickly ground and mixed a small number of pigments—black, white, red ochre, yellow. The angel adopted its now familiar pose, but he hardly looked at it, hardly touched his brush to the painted angel on the canvas. He worked in the lower right-hand corner of the painting, which had previously depicted only the bare walls and floor of the room.

He painted at a speed that made his work of the previous week seem slow by comparison. Paint seemed to flow from the brush almost effortlessly. At times, he felt as if he were a bystander in his own body, watching someone else paint.

At last, he laid down the brush. He forced himself to look the angel in the eye. "It's done."

The finished painting depicted an angel, its wings and pale skin glittering in a shaft of hard golden light. It stretched out a luminous hand toward a figure that lay crumpled on the floor: a man, bearded, middle-aged, in ragged once-fine clothes. A scar slashed down from the corner of one bushy, arched eyebrow to disappear into a scraggly black beard. His dark eyes stared sightlessly at something beyond the angel, perhaps the source of the light. A shadow, cast by one of the angel's wings, stretched across his body, ending in a point, like the tip of a dagger, at the center of his chest. He was dead.

Michele looked away from the painting to find the angel standing beside him, smiling. "You guessed my name."

"Yes," said Michele to the Angel of Death.

The angel spread its wings wide, and then he saw nothing but light.

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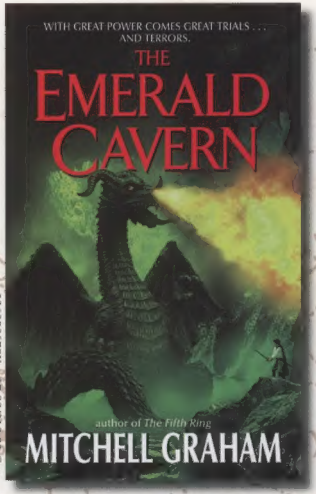

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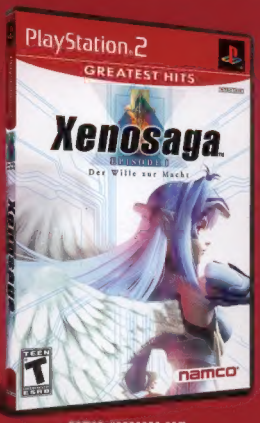

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